

# Introduction: Urban Research Across Chicago

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With this third volume of *Perspectives on Civic Activism and City Life*, the periodic urban research journal of The Field Museum's Center for Cultural Understanding and Change (CCUC), we present the work of our student intern ethnographers from 2003 and 2004. The program that gave rise to the papers in this volume is the Urban Research and Curriculum Transformation Institute (URCTI), which began in early 2003 thanks to generous support from the Ford Foundation. URCTI is the current expression of CCUC's long-standing dedication to urban issues, known formally as the Urban Research Initiative. The URCTI program, which includes both interns and faculty, seeks to increase academia's community engagement through the incorporation of community voices into the research and teaching processes. The six papers included here represent the six Chicago neighborhoods in which we have worked over the past two years: Austin, Near North, South Chicago, Englewood, North Kenwood-Oakland and Chicago Lawn.

*Perspectives* is a forum for our student intern ethnographers, community partners and faculty fellows to publish their research and discuss their views on issues such as healthcare, housing and neighborhood gentrification. This is the first edition to be available solely online, a format that is exciting due to its worldwide reach and the way it complements our departmental website. Like the first volume of *Perspectives*, this third publication includes only papers by our intern ethnographers, whose insightful research deserves public dissemination. In future volumes, we will return to including the voices of those with whom we work during the research process.

The papers that follow are the result of both an asset-based and participatory action approach to urban research. Following the work of Kretzman and McKnight (1993:2), we approach low-income neighborhoods with the view that residents have "capacities, skills and assets"

that can be built upon once identified as such. The "participatory action" component of our research stems in part from the work of William Foote Whyte, who describes participatory action research (PAR) as different from traditional social science in that members of the community being studied participate in the project's design, implementation and in the use of the information gathered for positive social change (Foote Whyte et al. 1991:20). Our approach to PAR differs from some of its other applications; though the planning and implementation of the projects are cooperative efforts, the research itself is carried out by intern ethnographers rather than community organizations themselves. This affords for more intensive research to be done in a shorter period of time. Within these parameters, our interns used the more traditional anthropological methods of participant obser-

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vation and informal, unstructured and semi-structured interviewing in their data collection.

The URCTI program's twin pillars of intern research and faculty development are innovative within the spheres of anthropology, museum studies, and indeed academia in general. During the summers of 2003 and 2004, selected faculty from colleges and universities around the Chicago area attended the eight-week institute at The Field Museum where they read about, discussed and observed PAR methods. The summer program concluded with faculty presentations of syllabi they have revised for the incorporation of these theoretical and methodological approaches. Their curricular innovation

is striking. Though the degree and form of the proposed classes vary, they all reflect a participatory ethos that derives its power from collaborating with and for research subjects, rather than relying upon methods that are merely extractive. The revised classes will be taught at their respective academic institutions in the coming semesters. This approach is part of an emerging trend in the academic and museum worlds, and specifically within The Field Museum, toward the inclusion of the thoughts and desires of the communities served (portrayed) in the process of creating programming.

The intern component of the URCTI program represents the practice of the theory discussed with faculty. Seven interns were selected each season from local and national colleges and universities, sharing backgrounds in social science research methods and an interest in social issues. Prior to the arrival of interns each June, URCTI staff meet with our community partners (see list, page 73) to discuss the research topics and related issues for the upcoming summer. In 2003, the research topic was decided with each organization independently, that is, there was no *a priori* unifying theme across the city. This is reflected in the diverse subject matter of the papers we are presenting from that year: a general overview of the social assets and cultural issues of the Austin neighborhood, an examination of how healthcare decisions are made in South Chicago and an inventory of community cohesiveness and arts-participation in the mixed-income development of North Town Village. Despite the different topics of the 2003 research, the neighborhoods described in these papers do face common issues. One of these is communication, which arises as a theme in South Chicago, North Town Village and Austin. Whether the issue is bringing together an untapped labor pool and local development and service projects, connecting people with essential information about their healthcare options or stimulating conversation and interaction across economic groups in mixed-income housing, the research from the 2003 field season illuminates ways for practical changes to be made in the neighborhoods in question.

During preparatory meetings with our community partners for the summer 2004 field season, consensus formed around the idea of having a common research theme across all the field sites. The broad topic of "land use" was chosen for summer 2004, with the specific focus

for each neighborhood determined by further conversations between the partner organization, the intern and URCTI staff. This topic's importance is ongoing in Chicago, especially in light of the Chicago Housing Authority's recent Plan for Transformation, which is altering the cultural geography of the city and the availability of low-income housing. Neighborhoods traditionally neglected by commercial interests are currently being redeveloped while the voices of those affected by these decisions are largely excluded from the planning process. Chicago is indeed being transformed as the perception, use and control of land is changing across the city. We at URCTI along with our community partners decided to investigate these issues in our neighborhoods, paying particular attention to the ways in which people see and organize the space around them, and to the ways decisions are made by people in power and by ordinary citizens. As part of our objective of more effectively placing community voices in the city's official decision-making process, we interviewed several people throughout the city (elected officials, academicians, developers) who currently have decision-making power about these issues. Our goal is that the information gathered from ethnographic research will empower people to gain influence over the places where they live.

At the start of the field season, each intern in conversation with their community partner narrowed the focus of their research question to suit the organization and neighborhood. Englewood's abundance of empty lots, long-standing environmental problems (including lead contamination) associated with illegal dumping and old house paint, and increasing development due to rising commercial interest near 63rd Street and the new Kennedy-King College led to an investigation into the uses and perception of vacant lots by the community. In contrast, Chicago Lawn (west of Englewood) has very little vacant land. Community planning processes are already in place in this neighborhood, and the researcher's goal was to discover how the voices of those currently excluded from planning and civic action can be incorporated, thereby granting some measure of control over the way land is used to the constantly changing cultural mix of residents. Lake Park Crescent is another site that is currently affected by the relationship between land use planners and the surrounding neighborhood. This

mixed-income housing development replaced the CHA's demolished Lake Park Homes and is located on the border of the North-Kenwood and Oakland communities. Using the research presented here, the development can pursue cultural integration through attention to the findings about the role of art, social networks and history in the strength of the community.

Each of the six papers<sup>i</sup> included here directly or implicitly suggest strategies for the organizations and neighborhoods they worked with to develop stronger communities. We expect the research to aid in the creation of awareness about and utilization of local assets such as the environmentally and socially beneficial gardens in Englewood and Austin and the oral and architectural history in North Kenwood-Oakland. More concrete uses of the research include its contribution to the content of grant proposals, letters to government officials and discussions at community meetings. Problems revealed through the research, such as the lack of multicultural community spaces in Chicago Lawn, can be better addressed now that the issues are clearly delineated. As we continue refining our research approach, execution and follow-through, we hope to stimulate positive social change in the city of Chicago in collaboration with our partners.

## Bibliography

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i Due to restrictions on space, we were unable to include four other research reports in this volume. Please visit our website, [www.fieldmuseum.org/urbanresearch/](http://www.fieldmuseum.org/urbanresearch/) for executive summaries and land use maps relating to all of the projects our interns completed.



# An Austin “Snapshot”: A Nine-Week Asset-Based Ethnography of a Far West Side Community

Nishaant Choksi

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## Introduction

This paper is based on research conducted for Bethel New Life, Inc., a faith-based community development corporation with its administrative headquarters in the Austin neighborhood on the far West Side of Chicago. The research was part of The Field Museum’s Urban Research and Curriculum Transformation Institute summer research program under the auspices of the Field Museum’s Center for Cultural Understanding and Change.

This project was multi-fold and began with mapping out the social assets present in the community. In what ways do residents participate in community life on an everyday basis? How would they like to increase their participation? What resources do they utilize, and how do they link with institutions in the community? A better understanding of the existing assets of residents can allow service providers like Bethel to connect with their constituency more effectively. Special emphasis was placed on entrepreneurship, infrastructure, arts and the demographic groups of youth, senior citizens and ex-offenders.

The next directive was to look at issues of place, family and success. How do residents perceive or determine their culture? What is the role of family within the community? What are the avenues of success, and do they lead out of the Austin area? Included in this research are perceptions of religion and tradition, since religion plays a vital role in family and community life in the Austin area. Within these broad topics, much can be studied, and this research project presents a general overview that may provide direction for further research in these areas.

Tensions do exist in the neighborhood, and an encompassing cultural arts agenda could open up new possibilities for bringing the community together. Other challenges face organizers and institutions in the Austin community, particularly in the areas of communication and collaboration. Austin has a rich history of activism, both in terms of social mobilization and the presence of community-based organizations, yet many people still do not access the programs being offered.

## Methods

A number of traditional ethnographic techniques were used in conducting this research, including structured, semi-structured and informal interviews as well as partic-



photograph of Nishaant Choksi by Ivan Watkins

ipant observation. Participant observation included both recordings of the daily life of residents and attendance at numerous public meetings. An ethnographic asset-based



approach was also used, relying on open-ended and informal interviews in lieu of surveys. In some cases, I also conducted informal focus groups.

## Neighborhood Overview

The Austin neighborhood stretches from the Eisenhower Expressway on the south to North Avenue on the north along Cicero and Central avenues and Austin Boulevard. Austin is 89.7 percent African American and has a population of 117,527 (U.S. Census 2000). The median income for Austin is \$33,633 (U.S. Census 2000), making it a “middle-income community” in the city. However, because of Austin’s size, it has pockets of growing wealth as well as signs of continuing poverty.

It’s “interesting,” as an Austin resident said, “you got the rich people and the poor people around here.” Many people who live and work in Austin express optimism in the community despite the current economic crisis most of them face. In a community where there are many homeowners, some people say that the property values have been increasing, businesses are coming in, communication between residents has increased, and “positive steps” are being taken to change Austin’s reputation as just another impoverished African American neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago. However, residents temper their optimism with concerns over the continuing presence of crime, particularly in the form of gangs and the drug trade, the lack of jobs, and looming gentrification in certain areas of the neighborhood.

In this densely populated African American community, there is a vibrant street life, with people selling CDs, kids selling sno-cones, seniors selling fruits and people just willing to chat. Public events are popular in Austin, and every weekend a community institution, whether it be a church, a park or block club, will put on some kind of street event. “Normally there’s somethin’ almost always goin’ on here, you just got to keep up with it,” said promoter Ron Smith while chatting with me at the Garfield market. Public festivals include youth fests in the parks, the gospel fests, aldermans’ festivals and the Taste of Austin, which happens every year in August. Public meetings are also very common in Austin, for public meetings occur almost every week in some fashion or another. Alderman Mitts holds a town hall meeting every

month, and other town hall meetings, block club meetings, organizational functions and family reunions are commonplace. People come together for a variety of reasons in Austin, and this trend presents enormous potential for community engagement.

The Austin area is spatially one of the largest neighborhoods in the city of Chicago. There are so many people, organizations and so much distance in the community that it was impossible for me to cover all of it during the internship period. Therefore, what has emerged is a partial mapping of the Austin neighborhood and groundwork for further research in this large and important Chicago community.

## Assets: The Residents

When Alderman Emma Mitts of the 37th Ward was asked to describe some of her neighborhood’s strengths, she immediately said, “We have a lot of good people here...I love to show love, if you give it, they’ll [give it] back.” During my time in Austin, I consistently saw people taking charge of their community, whether on a large scale, like organizing a six-block cleanup, or something smaller, like helping neighbors carry their groceries home. As the editor of the local *Austin Voice* said, “the people [of Austin] are wonderful...the people know how to run things.” It is common to hear residents discuss the types of informal help that exist on their blocks. For instance, one resident told me that one of her neighbor’s brothers “comes over every mornin’ and he’ll clean up after people,” sweeping the street and mowing the yards. “I see a lot of people doin’ things like that,” she added.

I met an ex-offender in the neighborhood who cleans up every morning and makes sure that other people on the block clean up behind them as well, whether they are his elderly neighbors or the drug dealers on the corner. This informal help assists in solidifying the community and expanding “networks of exchange” (Stack 1974:35), which are tapped into for grassroots organizing efforts in Austin such as block cleanups.

Reverend Davis, a pastor at a local Austin church, explained that “there is a great opportunity [in Austin] for teaching about entrepreneurship...a lot of people want to start businesses, but don’t have a way to start them.” Many people in the community express a desire to market

their skills or start a business. In the absence of any formal marketplace, men and youth set up stands on street corners selling everything from compact disks to bicycles on Division Avenue. Programs have been suggested to move gang leaders to entrepreneurship because, as the *Voice* editor put it, "They're running small businesses out there on a regular basis." Who's to say that the drug trade, though illegal, cannot teach substantive business skills? Kretzman and McKnight (2003:283), in their asset-based development model, advocate "unleashing the energies of local residents" for "creative approaches" to involve people in economic activity while developing their skills. These approaches are already being undertaken in the Austin community in a variety of ways, offering new and potential opportunities for local residents.

One viable avenue for entrepreneurship is community agriculture. Every Saturday, on the corner of Madison and Central Avenues, Austin has a farmers' market where people from all over the West Side bring fresh produce to sell. LaDonna Redmond, a West Garfield Park resident and former vendor at the Austin Farmers' Market (now relocated to the more upscale Garfield Park market) has large urban agriculture lots near the border of Austin and Garfield Park. She claimed that "an urban lot can grow food for the community, and food to be profitable." According to Redmond, restaurants around the city will pay a good price for fresh produce and there is a lot of "philanthropic support" to "build local food" supplies. Mary Peery, the head of the Austin GREEN team, which manages ten community gardens throughout the Austin area said, "If a young family [could] get in here, they would make good, they could sell their vegetables."

Data suggest that there is no shortage of skilled labor in Austin, and there exists a wellspring of labor potential even in what some people would consider the most marginalized of groups. For example, I met a disabled man, who "was shot up," but still enjoys rehabbing buildings. He showed me the outside of a family storefront property on Division Avenue, which he had fixed up into a marketable commercial property. However, the neighborhood's lack of job opportunities had prevented him from capitalizing on his refurbishing skills and he was moving to Wisconsin to look for work.

Although many Austin residents consider themselves skilled, they lack the requisite contacts to provide

them with suitable opportunities to exercise these skills. This is despite the fact that Austin has numerous "home-grown" entrepreneurial success stories. When asked how his business became so successful, James Cole, who runs a heavily frequented shoe shine and repair shop on Central Avenue said, "I work at it, I'm here all the time...serving the right things, serving the people..."

Connections within the community are crucial for further economic development in Austin. Neighborhood entrepreneurs are valuable resources who may be utilized to advance economic development. These informal networks, in addition to those found among friends, family, neighbors and churches have the potential to blossom into employment networks, as Taylor et al. found in their study of "black support networks" (1997:295). Research shows that "most black Americans (6 of 10) find their jobs through informal sources" (Taylor and Sellers 1997:155). These can facilitate what one Austin organizer calls "creative employment" among underserved populations.

## Assets: The Infrastructure

The disconnect between the labor pool and the larger society became clear when a Head Start coordinator was asked to describe her community. She said that it has a lot of "spaces," but lacks "manpower." Nevertheless, her observation about local infrastructure is correct. Predominately white and wealthy people lived in Austin more recently than any other neighborhood on the West Side, and when they fled in the late 1970s much of Austin's infrastructure, including its homes, buildings and commercial properties remained. Due to what residents cite as neglect by the city as well as other factors, a lot of this property has decayed. However, beautiful homes, apartment buildings and commercial corridors still make Austin stand out from neighboring West Side communities like West Garfield Park and North Lawndale. Whereas organizations like Bethel have been involved in *building* infrastructure in communities such as West Garfield Park, I heard many residents and community leaders talk of *acquiring* it in Austin. Infrastructure already exists in Austin, it just needs to be purchased and utilized for good purposes. As Kretzman and McKnight suggest, turning "underutilized space" into community assets is



essential for developing the area's economy as well as fulfilling gaps in social services (1993:311).

Austin residents recognize this, and many are currently working on utilizing Austin's rich infrastructure for community ends. Reverend Treadwell, who runs a five-day-a-week soup kitchen on Lake Street and Laramie Avenue, said that he has been trying to get an abandoned building for a homeless shelter for quite a while. Kitchen frequenters were pessimistic about it, although they said, "we could fix it up for him." A youth organizer at the Westside Health Authority, a social service organization in the Austin area, said that he was working on getting the old 15th District police station building to become a youth center. These are examples of people in the community trying to turn already existing infrastructure into community resources. As one pastor at the 37th Ward pastor's meeting put it, the area has so many "abandoned properties [to be fixed up]...you will be surprised at the young men who will leave the corner" to work on these projects. Mary Peery, a community gardener, said that she had to pester Housing and Urban Development to get houses on her block redone, though they eventually were. Families are now living in these refurbished homes, and property values have risen. In Austin, both the infrastructure and the labor needed to transform that infrastructure are plentiful. It is a matter of connecting the two.

Multi-use public spaces are another valuable asset in Austin. Columbus Park, for example, is nationally recognized as one of Jens Jensen's premier prairie-style landscapes. It has a beautiful lagoon where community residents fish, a forested area, playgrounds, a golf course, a players' green that was created for outdoor dramas, and a beautiful refectory for community events. There was jazz programming there on July 29th, which was highly attended by Austin residents as well as by those who live in the neighboring wealthy suburb of Oak Park. Other parks in the area are LaFollete in North Austin (also large with various facilities including a pool), Levitt Park and Austin Park, which has water slides. Close to Austin is Garfield Park, where the nationally known Conservatory has multiple programs for kids from the West Side. The Austin Town Hall, the old municipal building of Austin Township, is north of Columbus Park. Inside is an auditorium in which community residents enact plays and have musical performances. The Town Hall also has numerous

classrooms, a recording studio and a swimming pool.

There are two public libraries in Austin: the Austin Public Library on Race Avenue (by Central Avenue) and the North Austin Public Library on North Avenue (also by Central Avenue). A new library will be coming up on Chicago and Cicero avenues. The Austin Public Library is a beautiful building with an auditorium. These public institutions are open and frequented by residents of all class backgrounds.

While these institutions are valuable, they are run by the city, which often does not have an intimate understanding of the needs of the community. One Park District worker complained that parks up north and on the lakefront get a majority of the resources. "As long as you own your home and pay taxes, all parks should be treated the same," he asserted. Kretzman and McKnight (1993: 172) suggest that these public institutions become responsive when residents "capture" them, creating accountability and responsiveness to community interests. Parks and libraries are already rich public spaces, and collaboration with these institutions could create "accountability" on both ends with positive results.

Austin residents are attempting to create their own public spaces that are accessible to the community in ways similar to parks and libraries. For instance, Reverend Milton, a community organizer and pastor, linked up with the San Miguel School (a private school on Chicago and Leamington avenues) to open facilities for the Wednesday night service. The one I attended was packed with boys using the gym to play basketball and girls jumping rope. At the same time, according to Milton, "adults are there...we gonna' be right out there monitoring them...build[ing] relationships...they need facilities, outlets...[we need to be] finding places within the community [like] churches and schools." Milton advocates that community institutions perform a variety of different socially productive functions, not just ones that they have been narrowly assigned.

Austin's community gardens are another locally-initiated form of public space created for social interaction. One of the first community gardens in the Austin area was created by a local senior citizen in conjunction with the program NeighborSpace and Openlands' urban garden initiative. A vacant lot on the corner of Huron and Latrobe was converted into a flower and vegetable gar-



den, which she calls Paradise Gardens. While Paradise is fenced off, it is never locked and Peery often complains of people coming in and destroying plants. Nevertheless, she said, whereas other community gardens try to keep kids out, “if I see some children walking down the path [or] ridin’ bikes, I don’t say nothin’, I love it.”

Peery also appropriated the lot across the street for a sculpture garden, which is completely open to the public. It features three sculptures by kids at Austin High School, and children often congregate in the space, playing on the columns. Peery said that she had been accused by some neighbors of creating the sculpture garden for the drug dealers, “but do you see any out there...where people sellin’ drugs, they don’t want people [to be around].” Peery has linked with other senior citizens and together they have ten community gardens in the area, though many people in the neighborhood are unaware of these open spaces. One resident on the Garfield Park/Austin border said that his garden was created and run by his block club, and is perfect for simply hanging out with neighbors: “On the fourth [of July] we had people barbecuing out there.” Kretzman and McKnight (1993:318) say that projects such as gardens can be the first “building block” for community renewal. As Peery said, “beauty can be in Austin just like [it can be] on State Street [downtown].”

Local business can serve as what Conquergood (1990) calls “informal community centers” where gossip, job information and friendships blossom. In the small offices of the *Austin Voice* newspaper, kids are always coming in and out, and receptionist Julie Edwards gives them treats. “This is a place where they can come,” she said, “a safe haven.” This type of interaction, as we will see in later sections of this report, can lead into creative employment opportunities and build stable and comfortable relationships with the youth of the community. Likewise, businesses like the Shoe Shine King are places where people from different socioeconomic backgrounds and lifestyles can interact. In my time there, I was introduced by Mr. Cole to an ex-police commander, a head of an independent school, and a prostitute. Cole said he accepts anyone, “as long as they ain’t no harm to me or the people around me...I take you for who you are as an individual.” The Shoe Shine King was packed with people, whether they were clientele or just people sitting down chatting.

## Assets: The Arts

When Linda McWright was asked about an arts scene in Austin, she said, “there are kids, they got gifts, but nobody knows what they’re doin’.” My data suggest Austin’s art scene is indeed vibrant, but that much of the community remains uninformed about its opportunities. McWright, who has been in the concert promotion business for a number of years, now puts on talent shows in local parks: “I started doing talent shows at Garfield Park, people and kids came to see my showcase...there was nobody else there.” She has put on shows in all of the major parks on the West Side, including Columbus and Douglas, and is constantly scouting out talent. “We get record companies out for public concerts [let them know] that we got talent here in the city of Chicago,” she explained. Also, promoters like McWright recognize that community children love music and dance, but often need an “outlet,” someplace easily accessible where they can perform. McWright has a space at her small Clark Park field house where she lets “anyone come into [this] place and do their thing, I let them right in.” In the absence of sustained programming by the Park District, Austin residents still maintain an artistic atmosphere with private promoters such as McWright working through the public entities to foster the arts in their communities.

Churches are also places where the arts flourish. Church choirs and bands teach youth to play instruments and let adults exercise their talents. Reverend Davis, a local pastor, said that his youth ministry has a “rapping component” and “dance teams” and that the kids were “hyper about it.” Father Reed at St. Martin’s Episcopal Church has local residents do paintings for him, and he even had a local man make the altar when he remodeled the church interior. The church also has jazz services from time to time.

Libraries, such as the North Austin Library, also frequently invite local people to perform at programs. Donna Kanapes, the local librarian and an Austin resident, said she has fostered relationships with local artists for different types of programs, including performance art, music and poetry. The library, she said, “will continue to get local people to do African American programs” and hopes to host an open-mike event for children or young adults. Levette Hayes, who runs the Westside Cultural

Arts Council out of Garfield Park, operates a space at the Garfield Park Market and organizes monthly poetry readings at the Gold Dome. Hayes says that the space is accessible to any artist who wants to present his or her artwork, and she has linked with a number of artists from the Austin area as well as other parts of the West Side. This is an example of “building bridges” (Kretzman and McKnight 1993:185) between public institutions and community resources.

This partial asset mapping suggests that people in the Austin community have an interest in the arts, entrepreneurship and the transformation of space, and they have successfully capitalized on resources to develop these interests. Public institutions permeable to the community act as mediators during the process of development. Programs must serve to help residents capitalize on available resources, make connections and provide training to build on their interests.

## Issues: Youth

During my time in Austin, residents repeatedly asked, “What about the kids?” The perceptions of youth that I gleaned from conversations in the community varied wildly, and strategies for assisting youth ranged from chastisement to collaboration. People often seemed to feel that Austin youth had low attention spans and did not like structured activities. Youth were described as having narrow and provincial interests, and it was common to criminalize young adults, particularly men. For instance, one resident said that “the young adults standing out there on the corner, they standing on the corner for two things, either they gangbanging or sellin’ drugs.”

Although it is true that some kids are engaged in illicit activities, this widespread perception often hurts local youth. At a block cleanup, I heard an old lady shouting at a young man who came up and talked to his neighbor. “Man,” he said, “that old lady keep saying I’m on the corner. I ain’t on no corner, I work, I’m not gonna’ give up my freedom for no \$20 [the cut a dealer makes off a saleable amount of marijuana].” The lady’s perception and harassment of this young man made him anxious and angry.

At the same time, present day youth were described as “kids in adult bodies.” Residents, such as Brad

Cummings of the *Austin Voice*, said that due to broken homes and young single parents, many kids raise themselves in these new environments, assuming responsibilities for which they may not necessarily be ready. These assertions are supported by recent demographic studies that indicate more black children today are growing up in single-parent households and in poverty than in previous decades (Taylor et al. 2002:15-17). Chatting with youth at Bethel’s Gallery 37 program, I heard comments such as “most kids have ideas on stuff, but adults don’t listen to what they are saying,” suggesting that youth are not being taken seriously despite their additional responsibilities. Another youth said, “Maybe if adults started acting like adults, we would listen to them more,” an ironic spin on traditional social relations between youth and adults of the community.

Residents proposed a number of solutions to the youth-related problems, but two continually surfaced that offer ways to incorporate young voices in their own programs: creative employment and collaboration. Creative employment involves providing incentives to youth to take part in socially constructive activity that will instill some positive attachment toward their community, and collaboration enables youth to have some say in programs they are expected to participate in (this method could be especially helpful in areas such as cultural arts). Kretzman and McKnight cite active involvement of the youth in community affairs as one of the most important parts of developing a viable asset-based model. Youth offer a “unique energy and creativity,” and can make significant contributions to the community (1993:29).

Many Austin youth express an interest in learning about entrepreneurship. Stan Lewis, program director at the YMCA, said that “the biggest thing for teens are the programs that’ll turn into jobs with them...[they should] be able to develop skills...something to turn an idea that’ll start making money for them.” Lewis gives the examples of catering and using technology as ways in which youth can create opportunities for themselves. Businesses also are engaged in providing kids with jobs. For instance, at the *Austin Voice* newspaper, receptionist Julie Edwards says, “we give them [neighborhood kids] jobs everyday [to deliver papers, etc.] they’ll call me every day and ask ‘Ms. Edwards, do you have work for us’...a lot of neighborhood businesses don’t [give the kids work].” Across



the street from the *Voice* on North Avenue is Curlie's Bakery, where the proprietor has instituted a program taking what he has identified as "troubled teens" from Austin High School into his bakery to teach them about industrial baking and small business skills. "They say there's no work [around here] but we have to find something, create something for [the kids] to do," he commented. The Garfield Park Conservatory has a three-year teen program which takes high school kids and teaches them leadership and horticulture, first on a voluntary basis and then moves the kids to paid positions. This type of informal work, my data suggest, not only creates employment, but instills a sense of caring for the community as well.

Another aspect of the youth issue is what I loosely call youth collaboration. This means letting youth have a voice in what sorts of programs they are involved in based on the kinds of activities in which they have an interest. My data suggest that the youth in the Austin community, like most youth, have sophisticated networks of communication and, as Christie the librarian called it, "camaraderie" which can propel them forward to socially constructive activity. Often, youth are the best people to teach other youth, particularly on issues of interest to them. At Austin Public Library, Christie noticed that when young kids are on the Internet, they network and help each other out quite skillfully, and soon a whole group of kids are adept at using the web. Getting kids excited to teach each other about the skills they know could form the basis of a successful youth program.

Brad Cummings of the *Austin Voice* told me that when they worked at Marshall High School for the creation of a school newspaper, kids were asked what they liked to do, and no child was turned down. Kids who like to draw were enlisted as cartoonists, and even kids who were not the best achievers were accepted to do photography because they expressed interest. Consequently, the newspaper turned out well and students thought of it as their own project. In addition, Cummings and the *Austin Voice*, along with Operation Salvation, have thrown a Youth Fest the past two years, where they enlist youth to organize entertainment, ask for vendors and set the program. The youth make the event their own, learning from their past failures and obtaining valuable skills along the way. A willingness is emerging on the part of adult community members to begin dialogue with the youth on

what they want. One block club president said, "I've opened my eyes some...we're afraid of kids being kids...let's talk with the kids on the corner, see where their heads are."

## Issues: Senior Citizens

Many people in the Austin community see senior citizens as having enormous potential. Seniors have skills and experience, two things that they could potentially impart to other community members, particularly youth. The president of a block that is almost 50 percent seniors said, "I love my seniors, they have a 'been there done that' [attitude], and they really have [been there and done that]." She suggested enlisting the seniors to cook and solicit donations for the block club party, which should not be just for kids but for themselves as well. Brad Cummings discussed the senior citizen knowledge base when he talked about how the community enlisted seniors at a CHA residence to teach the kids, and how an old eighty-five year old lady "had them doing real work." Enlisting senior citizen help in imparting skills, particularly people whom young people know and respect, he suggested, could potentially grow into a great program: "You have to have [the seniors] come back and teach because people see themselves in those people." As they grow older, the chance that their knowledge will be passed on to the next generation of community members will diminish.

There was much talk about intergenerational programs in the Austin community, including the provision of senior mentors to youth. Each group can cater to the needs of the other. Stan Lewis had a successful program at the New City Y, where seniors would read to preschoolers, and he would like to institute a similar one in the Austin community. Linking seniors with youth on a consistent, substantive basis would be nothing new in the community, as ethnographic data suggest that senior citizens make up the cornerstone of many families and already play important roles in youth's lives. For instance, Mary Peery was raising her great-granddaughter, who was only six years old. Youth often talked about grandmothers in discussions, illustrating a strong kinship between grandchildren and grandparents. Further investigation and programming will be beneficial in enabling



seniors to become more involved with child care and other related issues.

## Issues: Family

Reverend Davis described Austin as a “family-oriented” community, yet within that, local perception of family varies. As previously mentioned, extended families—including grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins—play an important part in the life of the community. It was very common to hear kinship being used as a method of introduction. Common refrains included, “Oh, you know X, I’m his uncle,” or “yeah X is my nephew.” People identify themselves through family, a common “idiom” in other African American communities as well (Stack 1974:45).

Many people in Austin describe the family as undergoing a crisis. “Parents don’t have time, [they’re] not involved,” or “parents feel the education of their kids is the responsibility of schools and libraries,” are just samples of some of the responses I received after raising the issue of family. Family nights at both the library and the parks are poorly attended, and single parent families are on the rise. Alderman Mitts said that we have to “bring the family back to basics, spending time...[that’s] really bad in the African American community.” Nevertheless, personal stories reveal how important family is in people’s lives, and many elderly women revel in how they were, as single parents, able to raise their kids to be successful in their eyes. It was also common for youth to talk about the “way their parents” raised them, and the way their “family did stuff.” Family remains an important indicator of how people measure themselves and measure their community at large. K., an ex-offender discussed later in this report, says that when he “leaves the world, I want my momma to say K. was a good son, my grandma to say K. was a good grandson, my nephew to say K. was a good uncle.” Family affirmation, “my people,” he calls it, remains important to his own perception of self-worth.

Reverend Milton, a community organizer, uses family as a way of trying to instill a sense of community, the “village” as he refers to it. “Somebody is a grandmother, somebody needs a grandmother,” he said in one of his speeches. “Somebody’s a sister, somebody needs a sister, somebody’s a mother, and somebody needs a mother, and somebody’s a father...and let me tell you what, fathers are

sorely missing.” Carol Stack, in her analysis of African American family and kin relations, said that the “extension of kin relationships,” such as that reflected in Milton’s talk, can “allow for the creation of mutual aid domestic networks” (Stack 1974:61), which can solidify community. It is clear that family is functional and significant in Austin, contrary to perceptions of its dysfunction and decline.

## Issues: Ex-Offenders

Ex-offenders represent a particular problem, but also a strength, for the Austin community. Many ex-offenders come back to Austin and have a difficult time entering the job market due to societal pressures, restrictive laws and lack of information. Yet, they have to earn a living somehow. Thus, using the connections made in prison, many go back into criminal activity, and subsequently get picked up again. “Recycled scholarships” is how community organizer F., who works with Against All Odds [AAO]-an organization that is made up of ex-offenders, gang leaders, teachers, policemen, and professionals-describes the phenomenon: “Everybody come out thinkin’ they gonna’ help, but...a lot of them not strong enough to keep it...they hungry, and they tryin’ this new thing [service] which they don’t know.” However, ex-offenders are also an asset to the community precisely because many come out of prison with a will to serve, they know how to connect with youth and can impart firsthand experience. Groups like AAO and Faith, Inc.-a citywide, Austin-based program for ex-offenders run by Rev. John Crawford-actively campaign for creative employment opportunities for ex-offenders. “We provide assistance,” F. said, “[for them] to be self-sufficient, some corporations hire ex-offenders, some do side work, cut grass...our job is to hold on and to create [opportunities].” Forums like Faith, Inc., which have monthly meetings, pass on information to ex-offenders and publish resource guides as well.

During my research I encountered ex-offenders who have become dynamic individuals, working within their socially imposed limitations to create something positive in the Austin community. One example is K., a young man of twenty-eight who had been in prison for seven years for murder. K.’s criminal background makes him ineligible for a number of programs designed to prevent

recidivism, yet, as one person at the Faith, Inc. monthly meeting said to a probation officer, “they’re the people that need it most.” K. is currently in a parole period of eighteen months, and has to wear a police monitor which does not allow him to leave a certain radius of his house. Yet every day K. is out cleaning and doing odd jobs, as well as landscaping for neighbors for very little, if any, pay. K. has had a remarkable life. Coming from an abusive relationship, he started dealing drugs at fifteen, and by seventeen he was extremely wealthy and had purchased a house and car. By the time he was finally arrested, his reputation was known throughout the city of Chicago. When he got out he said, “it’s hard now [to reform]...that’s why I gotta help the community out, [I have to] win trust, they would never give me my [parole period] if I didn’t help out the community.”

Now K. is out talking to the youth on his block, both teenagers and younger kids, with whom he has a good rapport (as witnessed by his participation in the block cleanup, barbecuing for kids and block residents for two hours straight). “It’s not like my past is [a] secret, they know my past and they accept me, this community accepts me,” he said. K. wants to start a landscaping business and has purchased three or four lawnmowers, which he lends to kids for free to go out into their neighborhoods and mow lawns for no charge. “Eventually,” he said, “they’ll start getting paid.” The kids can keep the money they earn, and use it for college, while he can continue with the business and hopefully go to college himself. Prison offered K. education and insight, which he is starting to use to work positively in his own community.

## Issues: The Church’s Role

Religion and social service, as in most African American communities, are important aspects of the social life in Austin. Many social service providers are faith-based organizations. Austin is unique because, according to local pastors, the area boasts over 400 churches, many of which are located in store fronts. Perceptions of religion vary widely in the community, with many accepting the basic beliefs of Christianity.

But there are voices of criticism that target the church’s underlying conservatism and its incapacity to provide impetus for social and political change, rather

than just providing social services and garnering funds. Pastors I talked to were frustrated with black churches’ and faith-based organizations’ inability to deal with issues of AIDS. “Very few churches [are dealing with HIV/AIDS], I don’t know why, that’s where the problem ends up,” said Reverend Davis. Father Reed said that his church had to make an effort to do what other churches are not, “we have the highest impact of AIDS [in the city]...issues of homosexuals, drugs, AIDS...[churches] don’t deal with that.” In fact, one pastor said that generally, African American communities and faith organizations have a tough time even addressing the issue, “they don’t talk about sexuality...[in church it’s all] no sex before marriage, and little education about the body.” At Alderman Mitts’s 37th Ward minister’s meeting, I did not hear the issue of HIV/AIDS discussed once, even though it consistently appeared as a salient issue in my conversations with community residents.

While the alderman, as well as community organizers, view churches as an asset and rightly so, the proliferation of churches in the Austin area is sometimes seen as negative. One senior pastor said that people are trying to “snatch power, even if they weren’t called.” Also, the numerous storefront churches in the area are seen as halting economic development, “because the pastors ain’t hiring,” as one community organizer said. Churches’ influence on people is waning because many have relocated from other parts of the city, and their congregations often do not live in the neighborhood. There is a perception that churches are “not like they used to be, they don’t get involved [anymore],” as Mary Peery said. Father Reed worries about the staunchly conservative black church’s ability to effect social change, particularly due to attitudes about women, sexuality, and homosexuals. Nevertheless, in Austin, just like in St. Claire Drake’s Bronzeville, in the face of criticism the black church continues to be important due to the “opportunity it gives for large masses of people to function in an organized group” (Drake 1962:424). “The black church shapes values, mores of the black community far more than the people who attend the church,” said Father Reed, conveying that certain values taught in the church can and do pervade society. Religion also brings a fire and a passion to community meetings, and gives organizers a rallying point on which to mobilize constituents for change. Most of the community meetings

I went to, whether Alderman Mitts's Town Hall meetings, block club meetings, ex-offender meetings or community breakfasts, began with people holding hands and praying. Thus was fashioned a feeling of solidarity and community.

## Issues: Success

The community presents many pathways to success, both within the community itself and leading outside of it. The reputation of the schools is an issue that concerns many community members, especially the youth. "Austin has but one high school," said the librarian Christie, "and the [reputation] of that school is not very good. As a result, many of the good students, at the end of 8th grade, are siphoned off by magnet schools and private schools [outside the community]." Very few of the youth I met in the neighborhood actually went to Austin High School. Most attended private schools on the West Side, or other high schools elsewhere in the city. A young adult who was working on her master's degree in education, an Austin resident, said she was the only one on her block to go to college: "It depends on parents and schools, often times if you go to neighborhood schools [your chances are limited]." She cited a recent article of the *Austin Voice*, which showed that a number of Austin High School graduates do go to college, but as Brad Cummings said, many of those children overcame the tough odds and could go to college under "any conditions." One student said that if he had not been shielded from the Austin community by his parents, "I probably wouldn't have ended up at U of C [University of Chicago], I wouldn't be doing positive things [right now]." While both these youth left the neighborhood, they have different attitudes about returning. The girl, who had a vibrant community life and whose mother is a block club president, wants to return and eventually teach at a new elementary school being built in the neighborhood. The young man interested in music production wants to leave because there are more opportunities for his interests in places like New York and Los Angeles. "It depends on your experiences," the young woman said, "I never had friends who died in gangbanging. I would say a lot of block kids do say I can go to college so I can get out."

Success can also be judged within the community itself. Successful community organizers, pastors and lead-

ers are recognized as such by having streets named after them and markers attributed to them. For instance, Pastor Obie Hendricks, whom I talked to, had a street named after him, as did other community activists, one of whom lives in the Bethel New Life senior residences. James Cole would probably be considered by many, himself included, to be successful and he stayed within the community. In his terms, success is hard work and knowing your clientele. As mentioned earlier, people like K. thought of success in terms of family and community perception of an individual: if you do good by them, they'll do good by you. A common theme that emerged was the term being "rich." A number of people whom I talked to describe themselves as being "rich." In their terms, "rich" was not referring to material wealth. When people ask Mary Peery if she's getting paid for gardening, she replies, "I know I'm getting paid, in my heart I'm getting paid." These sentiments were echoed by people who have devoted themselves to the community in some way or another.

## Arts Making—Bringing the Community Together?

There are many ways that tensions within the Austin community can be resolved, and expanding arts practices is one of the options. There are a large number of homeowners in the Austin community, and tension arises between them and renters who are perceived as not having much of a stake in the community's upkeep. One resident characterized newcomers from the east as not knowing "how to socialize without being stupid," meaning that these people do not participate in social organization in the same way as homeowners. Conquergood (1990:227), in his studies of the Chicago neighborhood of Albany Park, notices that "property ownership separates people more than race or ethnicity."

Another tension is between those, especially youth, who look outwards from the community and youth who stay within the community. For instance, a college student I talked to who lives in Austin claimed that he was proud that he was not "a product" of the West Side, even though he attended school at Providence-St. Mel, went to church on the West Side and lived in Austin. Looming gentrification compounds the issue as well, with the possibility of bringing what Austin resident and librarian Donna



Kanapes calls yuppies, “a person who has money, but no sense of community, neighborhood, or caring.” Although she lives in a stable community and does not see the possibility of “white people moving in,” organizers such as F. recognize it as a possibility.

An artist who collaborates with Bethel New Life told me once that a “cultural arts program is different from a social service provider,” meaning that services should not be provided for arts, but environments created that can foster the arts. As I have outlined in previous sections, the Austin community has an artistic environment, and there exist organizations who are trying to connect artists and provide spaces for artists to come together. As performance artist Sharon Jaddua mentioned, interest in theatre exists for all ages, and a number of institutions, such as churches and schools, could use their space to foster an artistic environment. As Carl Grimms of the Garfield Park Conservatory stated, collaboration and linkages between institutions should be formed before art projects can be undertaken. The Chapungu exhibit—which consisted of stone sculptures from Zimbabwe—was chosen with the West Side’s predominantly African American population in mind, since the previous Chihuly blown glass exhibit had attracted “more suburban visitors”. However, when I toured Chapungu and the Garfield Market, there were a number of non-resident visitors as well as West Siders, illustrating how arts can be a powerful factor in bringing together people who normally do not mingle.

As a Field Museum study by Alaka Wali et al. (2002) has shown, the informal arts can foster a sense of community, bringing people together across racial, ethnic and class lines. My data suggest a similar conclusion, for in Austin, different youth, homeowners and tenants share similar cultural and artistic interests which could bring them together if the environment was suitable. For instance, the youth who wants to leave Austin and was educated outside Austin, is very knowledgeable about alternative music production having started in high school and continued through college. He said that especially since the rise to fame of producer groups like the Neptunes, music production has become an increasingly popular form of artistic expression in hip-hop. He indicated that he would be amenable to teaching people how to produce music outside the dictates of pop culture. The

young college graduate who wants to be a teacher in the community and was also educated outside Austin is interested in poetry. She said spoken word shows around the block would be a great way of bringing youth of different backgrounds together. While cultural arts programs are not always successful, they have the potential to bring in large audiences from a variety of backgrounds.

## Challenges and Recommendations: Communication and Collaboration

Brad Cummings of the *Austin Voice* said that it was amazing to him why, as organized as Austin is, not much happens and so much gets left out or ignored: “It’s like the metaphor that young woman used for Austin High School. All the chairs are neatly arranged, they’re just facing the wrong way.” Indeed, the Austin community is extremely well organized, and people and groups are consistently meeting, discussing and participating in social organizations of various types. The community also has a history of organizing around such issues as gang violence and the prevention of the closing of facilities.

Given this history, why do many people find it difficult to attract users of services or get things done? Two issues that have surfaced from my data are communication and collaboration. There needs to be a better network of communication and education about services being offered in the community, and better collaboration between the many community-based and social service organizations to provide services more effectively.

For social service programs, communication, availability and accessibility are key issues for increasing attendance, especially in the Austin community. “I go to a lot of stuff,” said Reverend Davis, “and [there’s] even stuff I don’t know about. There needs to be a better flow of information.” Or, as the unemployed said in a soup kitchen about jobs, “They don’t put the word out, they don’t broadcast it, they don’t put the word out there.” At Emma Mitts’s Town Hall Meeting, a representative from the city of Chicago’s Department of Transportation was there explaining renovations to a bridge. Two elderly ladies demanded to know why information was not available to the community prior to the proposal’s enactment. “Why don’t you have the diagram,” one said, pointing to a poster-board, “on paper so people in the community can

read it...it would be nice if we could get some information." The city official agreed, and said next time that would be made available. In order for effective debate about the issues to occur, information needs to be available prior to the debate itself.

Residents suggested that literature should be disseminated as locally as possible. A block club president said that she "needs information" so she can pass it on to the people on her block who may be interested. Flyers and literature should not only be posted, but distributed through local networks. Public meetings, whether at the park, church, or on the block, are another excellent way to convey messages. My data suggest that information should be brought to people because people often do not know where to look on their own. Reverend Milton, a community organizer, would always talk to people, even if they were strangers. He would tell them about Wednesday nights at the San Miguel School, or about a block cleanup and free food. Regardless of their interest level, they knew about upcoming events because word was taken directly to them.

An appropriate audience for communication efforts is youth, for they often influence their families. "The push gotta' be from the youth," said Stan Lewis of the Y, for youth often make or break programs meant for families. This was evident when I went to a meeting at the Westside Health Authority (WHA), where a number of new participants came because their children played baseball on the WHA's new baseball team. At Reverend Milton's service at San Miguel School, I met a grandparent who came because his grandson had heard from other kids that there was basketball and he came to see what it was all about. The YMCA has a similar program with young men, opening up the gym as long as they devote a few minutes to discussing program opportunities and volunteering with the Y.

Programs have to be accessible. People have perceptions of social service providers as elite or inaccessible. As one Bethel worker put it to me, "people don't want to read and sign all these papers if they're hungry," implying that the arduous process of documentation may be a turnoff for people who are just looking for sustenance to get on with their lives. That is perhaps why governmental and social service providers complain that people are not accessing services, when organizations like Reverend

Treadwell's Soup Kitchen, though financially less sound, have much more participation.

Collaboration is necessary in an environment where there are a number of organizations that have a stake in the community. Mildred Wiley, Bethel New Life community-building director, said that "In Austin there has been a lot of organizations that have [had] a stake in the community for a long time...[any effort] has to be collaborative." In order to get anything done, Wiley suggests, "conversations" are necessary because, as many community members have said, different organizations often "duplicate" services. Groups are also perceived as "sucking up money" and not providing adequate programming. Some people feel that organizations do not provide enough grassroots activity. One resident said, "these organizations, they all for themselves." Additional collaboration may allow organizations to integrate with the community, as Donna Kanapes, the librarian suggested: "I think we could collaborate more, market to each other." Community members suggested that consistent collaboration between institutions and organizations, and a willingness to cooperate by all members, have led to positive results in the Austin community area.

Examples are numerous. As mentioned earlier, the *Austin Voice* collaborated with Marshall School to create a successful newspaper program at the school. The editor and staff were willing to support the school and students fully. North Austin Public Library and Lovitz School have been collaborating and now, according to librarian Donna Kanapes, "Lovitz School's literacy is higher than other schools in Austin...it's that kind of commitment you need to have from schools." Promoters Ron Smith and Linda McWright collaborate with the Park District, and LaDonna Redmond says her Institute has consistently "support[ed] farmers through Farmer's Market and we're ready to create a [cooperatively] owned grocery store." Austin aldermen such as Emma Mitts are available for "dialoguing" and are active in community meetings and seminars. Carl Grimms, who has led the new collaborative efforts of the Garfield Park Conservatory, said that working on the West Side he has learned that "the most important thing is to be creative...use many different approaches simultaneously," including working with community institutions, individuals, programming sites and neighborhood schools. Though community associations and public

meetings are an essential part of accomplishing goals in a community such as Austin, only through collaboration can these goals truly be reached.

## Conclusion

As one resident referred to social science work, this paper is merely a “snapshot” of the Austin community. I have tried to outline some of the assets I saw in my nine-week internship and the important issues I heard and discussed while proposing some programmatic solutions for Bethel New Life and other organizations to pursue. Austin is a community with a history of organization, and most residents are conscious of its social institutions, assets and needs. Many individuals involve themselves in the community on their own initiative, through informal networks, by organizing into block clubs, or by linking themselves with institutions. A number of residents have skills and the interest to make money, and the infrastructure exists to facilitate that process. Austin also has a vibrant artistic scene, and any program geared towards cultural arts should try to incorporate the various arts already underway in the community. Youth, senior citizens and ex-offenders pose certain challenges, but my findings indicate that through recognition and collaboration, these groups perhaps represent some of the community’s most valuable assets in terms of energy, experience and knowledge.

While this paper in no way represents the multiple cultural forms or interpretations that exist in the Austin community, I hope that it does highlight some major themes. I suggest further research be undertaken in order to complicate the conclusions given in this report. I believe only by seriously considering a multiplicity of opinions and views, as well as engaging in long-term debates and discussions with residents, can programs and social engagement truly be successful. I found Austin to be a very vibrant and accessible community with friendly people who are willing to talk if one engages with a spirit to listen. Austin has a number of assets and much potential, and hopefully this report will open up further avenues of exploration for those interested in working with this community.

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# Before the Barbeque: Community Building and the Arts in a Mixed-Income Chicago Neighborhood

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## Looking for Directions Near Cabrini-Green

A t lunch break in the Dominick's food court, a well-dressed gentleman rustled a newspaper and crunched on a salad. In another booth an elderly woman stared ahead. Soon she was waving as a middle-aged woman approached her table. They embraced one another and reminisced about growing up in Cabrini-Green.

"You know about all the changes happening here," the middle-aged woman said while gesturing west. "Well, I was trying to tell someone who hasn't been here for awhile how to get to Seward Park and he got lost 'cause everything's changed!"

"That's for sure," the older woman replied, "I hardly recognize this area anymore!"

What some refer to as "changes" or "opportunity" and others dub "homelessness," the Chicago Housing Authority calls the Plan for Transformation, a 1.6 billion dollar HUD-backed contract to rebuild or refurbish 25,000 units of public housing by 2009. Under its guidelines, CHA vows to demolish all properties that are more expensive to repair than replace, including all fifty-three high-rise buildings of Cabrini-Green. This so-called "notorious" community, shaped by forty years of media denigration, building neglect and an enduring neighborhood spirit, will soon be replaced by private, mixed-income developments run by management contractors selected through a competitive bidding process.

Just as those concrete monoliths once dominated the skyline, cobblestone town homes are now quietly reclaiming the street. Of the eight developments that have already been built, six skirt the edges of Cabrini-Green. Since Near North is the most developed and emergent of all the project sites, these "Squares" and "Villages" and

"Parks" are part of a big test. As one Chicago newspaper put it, "If upper income Chicagoans won't go for mixed-income housing at that Near North site, the odds aren't good elsewhere" (Grossman 2002).

Brochure packets geared to entice market rate buyers speak of "private parks," "dining options" and "beautifully landscaped yards and streets." Moving to Near North, however, is more than signing a hefty check and heading out to shop at Pottery Barn down the road. It is a step to becoming part of one of the most quickly integrated communities in the country: a decision that necessitates new neighborhood identity, resident coalescence and personal investment for long-term success.

Management in these mixed-income developments is faced with the task of constructing an environment that

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*...threatening space needs to be redefined and activities planned to provide opportunities for market rate, affordable and public housing residents to come together.*

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can foster a sense of community. In Near North, threatening space needs to be redefined and activities planned to provide opportunities for market rate, affordable and public housing residents to come together. Although these efforts can help facilitate resident interaction, in the end, the key to true connection lies within the choice residents make to greet each other, to be honest with one another and to invite a neighbor over for supper.

Three years have passed since North Town Village—the first site to evenly integrate market rate, affordable and CHA residents into the development plan—broke ground. For more than a year, residents of radically different social, economic, racial and cultural backgrounds have been living beside one another, not only in the development, but also throughout the surrounding area of Near North.

The following ethnographic report presents the current community climate in North Town Village and Near North by examining the ways residents of different socioeconomic backgrounds interact with one another and use public space. In Wali et al. 2002, researchers found that participation in informal arts activities enabled people to overcome the social barriers of gender, age, race/ethnicity and occupational status. Because such activities fall outside traditional non-profit and commercial art endeavors, they facilitate meaningful community-building experiences in innovative ways. Building on this research study, the current report analyzes informal arts activities in North Town Village and Near North as potential mechanisms to stimulate resident interaction. Lastly, it depicts how Near North residents, organizers and workers define their community and visualize people connecting with one another in the coming years.

## The Changing Project

This research was conducted through an internship with The Field Museum's Urban Research and Curriculum Transformation Institute at the Center for Cultural Understanding and Change. Originally, its purpose was to work with Holsten Real Estate Group—the private developer of North Town Village and other mixed-income housing developments in Chicago—to chronicle the artistic strengths and interests of market rate, affordable, and CHA residents through focus groups, interviews and surveys in the community. Using the findings of Wali et al. 2002, Holsten hoped that this data would assist them in facilitating opportunities for cross-income interaction. Their original intent with this internship project was to train four North Town Village residents to conduct arts-interest asset mapping through focus groups, interviews and surveys in their community. However, when it became clear that the scope of these project goals

exceeded what could be accomplished during the nine-week research period, the intern began to shift her ethnography to more of a focus in the surrounding area than in the development. New research questions were considered with themes centered on building community, the arts and use of space.

The following questions were designed to provide Holsten with an understanding of the assets and limitations in Near North as a context for facilitating neighborly interaction within the development:

- What is the extent of market rate, affordable, and public housing resident interaction in Near North and North Town Village?
- How is public space used and perceived in Near North and North Town Village?
- What arts opportunities exist in Near North?
- How do residents, organizers and workers perceive Near North and North Town Village, and what visions do they have for the future?
- How do residents, organizers and workers foresee people of different social, economic, racial and cultural backgrounds interacting within Near North and North Town Village?

A variety of ethnographic techniques were employed to provide breadth and meaning to the data collection. Initially, participant observation and informal, open-ended interviews were conducted in North Town Village and Near North. At the request of Holsten, informal interviews with mixed-income residents were not conducted in the development itself. Community reconnaissance provided a list of arts-based groups in the area and informal interviews were conducted with group members. Snowballing was used to ensure informant diversity. Later, participant observation continued while semi-structured interviews were employed to follow-up with previously interviewed informants.

## North Town Village: A Community Metaphor

In a way, North Town Village serves as a metaphoric model for community interactions and spatial perceptions and arrangements in Near North. Both communities contain residents of different social, economic, racial and cul-

tural backgrounds living close together, many of whom have not found effective long-term means of connecting with one another. Just as space is racially and economically divided in the north and south sectors of North Town Village, space remains generally divided between the community north of Division Street and east of Clybourn Avenue (commonly perceived as the Old Town neighborhood) and south of Division Street and west of Clybourn Avenue (Cabrini-Green). The general lack of structured and integrative adult activities in both areas is compounded by the fact that there are few community spaces to publicize events that do occur.

When residents, workers and organizers in Near North heard the name "North Town Village," they responded in different ways. Some said, for example, that the housing development was "nice and quiet" and they "respect developers who can incorporate mixed-income into their plans." Many respondents indicated that they "thought about living there." Others, however, perceived the development as having "too many rules" and wondered "Why they don't have community meetings for residents where they can tell each other what's on their mind?"

Fostering a sense of community, however, is not as simple as holding meetings so residents can "tell what's on their mind." North Town Village, a 58 million dollar experiment in mixed-income housing and a potential model for similar developments across the nation, has much at stake if it should fail. In order to ensure its positive perception—an important factor in attracting and sustaining market rate buyers—safety and cleanliness hold priority over social planning.

Throughout the summer, development security routinely inspected the area and discouraged large, unstructured social gatherings by disbanding groups of bicycle riders, shooing people off the freshly cut grass and investigating the activities of mingling groups. Although safety is an important concern in a neighborhood bounded by Cabrini-Green, it is not the only factor in producing a sustainable, mixed-income environment. In a study of seven mixed-income developments across the country, Brophy and Smith (1997:6) found that among income groups, "benefits...will be achieved only if there is, in fact, interaction."

Ever since opening in 2001, North Town Village

staff have managed two community rooms and organized monthly social events, which are often oriented towards children. Despite these efforts, the community rooms are kept locked except for condo association meetings and events sponsored by Holsten. In addition, residents have expressed disappointment in missing many of these activities because of poor publicity. In one conversation, a resident explained that he walked by an event happening in the community room that he "didn't know about." He complained that there is "no publicity here." When told that there was a bulletin board outside one of the community rooms, he retorted that "no one goes over there" and that he didn't understand "why they can't put things on trees like they do in other places." He regretted having missed so many events because he wants to "get to know people."

Throughout the summer, on the one publicly accessible bulletin board outside a community room, fliers for CAPS meetings, burglary notices, parking permit warnings, condo association meetings and firework prohibition statements were posted instead of social activities. During the nine weeks of this research, public adult-oriented social events, which could facilitate the discussion of resident dissatisfaction, did not occur in North Town Village.

Compounding the problem of locked community rooms, there are no accessible outdoor social spaces designed to facilitate resident interaction, such as grass with benches. There are large, grassy areas with colorful flowerbeds and circular pathways, but these do not include benches or places to sit and enjoy the space. Children are shooed away if they are caught playing on the grass or riding their bikes along the pathways.

Despite a lack of planned, adult-oriented activities or publicly accessible space, residents still find ways of interacting with one another within the development. While the north side of the complex, bounded by the YMCA, usually remains quiet until cars roll into the garages after work, the south side of the complex, bounded by Cabrini-Green, is usually rich with unstructured community interaction. In response to the southern area of the development, one of the security guards exclaimed, "there's always stuff happening. A lot of people who live over there came from the Greens and so their friends are still over there and they come in to see them."

Throughout the summer, I observed residents of



North Town Village forming their own social spaces within the built environment. Groups of adults congregated on the stairwells, and adults and children sat with one another on the south side curbs. Children played baseball and rode bikes by the fences opening to Scott Street where they were able to disperse quickly if reprimanded by the security guard. Most people interacting in groups on the south side of the complex were public housing residents.

Observed interactions on the north side were infrequent and included mostly market rate residents. Once a woman and a man talked while leaning against their cars. Their conversation lasted five minutes, and then they went their separate ways. Another time, two women walked around the garden path a few times before going into a town home.

Brophy and Smith (1997) found that some mixed-income developments have succeeded in drawing higher-income groups, but have not succeeded in making these groups involved. As a result, such developments “seem to have minimal interacting and neighboring” among these residents and the subsidized groups (16). During the nine-week research period, the only observed interactions between market rate and public housing residents outside of Holsten events were in the center of the development and often involved dogs. A few times, a public housing resident talked briefly with a market rate resident on the corner of the traffic circle while playing with the dog. When asked whether she had much contact with public housing residents, one market rate resident replied, “I mainly talk to the ones that interact with me and my dog.” An affordable housing resident, who bakes brownies for incoming families, lamented, “Overall, people of different income groups don’t talk to each other.”

A residents’ association and more structured, adult social activity, especially events centered on food, could aid residents in getting to know one another. A public housing resident exclaimed “I wish they could plan something big, like a barbeque.” He added that he “doesn’t really know anyone here who’s not from Cabrini” and that made him think that “there aren’t a lot of people who were not from Cabrini who live here.” A market rate resident confessed that she would love to have more adult-oriented activities in North Town Village. She emphasized that since she does not have children, she never goes to

children-oriented social activities. She stressed that she still wants to get to know public housing residents, many of whom have children.

During the brief research period, there was one sponsored community event: the Out of School Party. Despite being geared toward children, some adults were enthusiastic and eager to help make the event a success. An hour before, three public housing residents and one market rate resident and his daughter came to offer their assistance with the preparations. Throughout the party, female public housing residents ate food and talked with one another while their children participated in the report card raffle, played games with one another and ate. Since the children wore nametags with their addresses, it was evident that most of the attendees lived on the south side of the development. At one point, a market rate resident brought her dog over to the party, played with the children and talked to a few of the public housing women.

At the end of the event, one of the women in attendance started emptying the trash. The event organizer exclaimed, “You don’t have to do that!” The woman continued to tie the bags and replied, “I want to help in anyway I can. My kids are participating in your event, so I will help out, and I will at the next one too!” The event made the woman feel a part of the community, and through it, invested in its welfare. Upon dispersal, many residents claimed that the event was “fun” and that “we need to have more of these,” reactions that reveal a community inchoate and underline the need for increased social planning.

## Spatial Perceptions and Resident Interactions in Near North

Unlike North Town Village, where all residents are new to the development, residents in Near North are separated by the length of time they have lived in the area. One public housing resident explained “They call it in the neighborhood the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ residents.” While some residents have lived in the area for “ages” and have established social networks, others are moving independently into newly built town homes and condominiums, often constructed on the sites of demolished “old” resident homes and landmarks. In one interview, a longtime Cabrini-Green resident gave a walking tour of the way “this place used to be:”

See where those town homes are over there? That's where Oscar Meyer was, and over there where those new homes are, that's where Cooley School was. And on the other side of Larrabee, where those new homes are, there used to be buildings there. And see over there, those brick buildings? That's where I grew up. I heard they're tearing those down to build new town homes.



photograph of graffiti saying "Cabrini" by Deirdre Pfeiffer

Many Cabrini-Green residents maintain that they accept all these changes "as long as everyone is provided a place to live in the community." As indicated in the CHA's Plan for Transformation, all residents lease compliant as of October 1, 1999 will be allowed to "eventually" move back into their communities of origin. According to resident testimony, however, many families are being persuaded by CHA officials to take permanent Housing Choice Vouchers to use in apartments elsewhere in the city, a decision that denies them the right to return.

Lewis and Ward (2004) estimated that 90 percent of recent voucher recipients wind up in low-income minority neighborhoods on the south and west sides of Chicago. During the 2003 Hearing on HOPE VI and the Low Income Housing Crisis, Attorney William Wilen of the National Center on Poverty Law testified that only 11.4 percent of public housing residents will be eligible to relocate to mixed-income communities. Consequently, many residents see public housing redevelopment as a process that provides homes for the rich

while taking away their own. At a Cabrini-Green town hall meeting, an eighteen-year old life long resident declared, "We're sitting on prime land. People don't realize this and take [housing choice] vouchers. Cabrini was built to be torn down. People think we're coming up and out when we leave but we're walking into hell. We're going to be on the streets."

Faced with an uncertain future, some residents have begun both aggressive and passive efforts of reclaiming redeveloped space. Everyday new graffiti tags appear on trashcans, walls and benches at the recently refurbished Seward Park and on the construction barriers and new brick walls of area town homes. Vandalism such as broken windows and stolen building supplies has also occurred. Other residents assert their right to space passively. During one observation, two women brought their lawn chairs and sat and talked on the stoop of a partially constructed town home all afternoon. In another instance, a man brought his lawn chair right up to a condominium construction site and sat in front of it on the sidewalk all day. The next morning, his chair was still there. Cabrini kids playing baseball at the YMCA often jump the fence and cut through North Town Village,



photograph of "keep away" graffiti by Deirdre Pfeiffer

laughing as they elude the snacking security guard.

Despite an active assertion of rights to space, there are still general demographic spatial divisions in the Near North community. Often these divisions are self-created and not enforced, such as spaces that residents avoid out

of fear. One public housing resident confessed that he never went into Stanton Park because it was “dangerous.” He said, “I’ve lived here all my life and I’m scared to go in there!” Other times residents are discouraged from entering spaces where they look like they do not belong. For example, some market rate residents admitted to being stopped by the police upon entering Cabrini-Green and warned that it was “a dangerous area” and they should “stick to the main roads.”

Just as public space is segregated in the community, interactions between market rate, affordable and public housing residents are demarcated. During the research period, Cabrini-Green residents had cookouts, greeted one another on the street, played basketball and gardened together, while market rate and affordable residents barbecued on their town home balconies, socialized on a dog walk and played baseball in Seward Park. The only observed interactions that cut across socioeconomic class were those that occurred between market rate adults and public housing children under the tenets of a tutor-mentoring association or through religious volunteer work.

Even though extensive adult interaction across income groups has yet to transpire, there are public places in the community that represent and serve all residents. Just as the traffic circle in North Town Village serves as an integrative space, market rate, affordable and public housing residents use Dominick’s, the YMCA, the Near North Library and Seward Park. These spaces serve as community publicity hubs with bulletin boards displaying subjects as diverse as safety, arts, housing, meetings and neighborhood events. Although the YMCA isolates residents that cannot afford the membership fee and Dominick’s is a commercial environment, the library and Seward Park are places where all residents are encouraged to meet, play and simply “be.”

The 2001 Urban Land Institute Policy report stresses that “community facilities...can play an important role in creating and sustaining mixed-income communities. In the best cases, these facilities are an integral part of the community and create a place where residents can convene, learn, and get to know one another” (Myerson 2001:2). The Near North Library is an example of one such facility. As a librarian who works there explained, “Ever since we’ve opened, it’s been a mixed group attending. This is one of the few places you can go where every-

one is welcome.” During the research period, people of different social, economic, racial and cultural backgrounds were observed sitting at tables in the main area of the library and chatting with one another while waiting for the ten-minute internet station. The librarian added that what makes the space different from other places is that it “doesn’t have a certain goal.”

One homeless woman, who came to the library everyday to arrange her papers, write in her journal and create poetry, admitted it was one of the only places in the community where she could just “be.” Kids came to the library when their parents wanted them out of the house and would use the phone there to call them when they wanted to come home. In a neighborhood where public meeting space is scarce, the library provides two conference rooms, which can be reserved free of charge. Groups as diverse as a performing arts troupe, condominium associations and social activists use these rooms regularly. People also meet one another at the library to talk or eat lunch outside together on the wrought iron benches.

Similarly, Seward Park is a “place for the whole community...both the new and old,” as one park official explained. Not only do neighborhood kids use the park as an after school hangout where they can play basketball and jump rope, but it also serves as a neutral space where adults can meet and talk to one another. Often adults were observed sitting and talking on the surrounding benches near the entrance to the park. Men brought their lunches and talked to one another until late afternoon. Others were observed slouched in the benches, napping. Women primarily used the park as a play area for children, but would also socialize with each other while their children chased one another down the slide. The playground was one space in the neighborhood where market rate and public housing women were frequently observed interacting.

Seward Park is one of the few places that offer free arts programming to resident children and adults of all ages and backgrounds. One organizer explained that she wanted all of the people in the community to be able to rehearse and perform together in her group. Many residents see the open, non-threatening nature of Seward Park as an ideal location where different groups of people can be brought together to meet. One public housing res-



ident, describing a community meeting she would like to have for all residents of Near North, stated “And if I was gonna pick a place to meet, I’d say the park, because it’s a neutral place, and I’d meet right out in the open.”

## The Arts and Building Community

Asked to identify a way that residents could be brought together in Near North, a dance instructor and a Cabrini-Green resident suggested “through a strong arts program.” Indeed, in transitioning public housing neighborhoods, the informal arts could be used as a mechanism for residents of different backgrounds to get to know one another. As defined in Wali et al. 2002:2, informal arts are “popular creative activities that fall outside traditional non-profit and commercial art experiences.” Such activities range from spontaneous and self-produced art to that created within structured environments and sponsored by organizations. In their survey of informal art activities across the Chicago region, researchers found that these endeavors “build both individual identity and group solidarity,” linking participants across a cultural continuum (Wali et al. 2002:2). Not only did these activities bring people of different social, economic, racial and cultural backgrounds together, but they also facilitated feelings of community identification and investment among participants.

In Near North, residents had different perspectives on the extent of arts involvement in their community. Although one resident stressed that there was a “huge art community in the area,” another insisted “there definitely aren’t groups of people who come together and do art in the area.” Most responses indicating that arts were believed to be in the area came from market rate residents, while most opinions to the contrary came from public housing residents. Yet, many of the formal arts activities involving children and informal arts activities involving adults were observed in Cabrini-Green. This discrepancy between public housing residents’ perceptions and participation in arts activities is due to lack of publicity about the arts. Over half of the interviewed individuals who defined themselves as artists lived or worked in the area south of Division Street, an area composed predominantly of public housing developments. Two of the three arts organizations that regularly involve mixed

socioeconomic groups of adults and children are situated in this area.

Unfortunately, many of the activities of these arts organizations are unpublicized and performances are not widely attended by community residents. Instead, housing relocation, fear and crime are publicized. Such factors contribute to the perception that “arts don’t happen here,” a statement often followed by the assertion that Cabrini-Green residents “have other things to worry about.”

Besides not being effectively publicized, many of the observed informal arts activities in Near North involved illegal activities such as graffiti. Out of the remaining art activities, most were composed of public housing children and market rate adults or volunteers incorporated under the structure of an after school, summer or tutor-mentoring program. Often, these activities were affiliated with a religious organization, such as the Moody Bible Institute. Other activities consisted of artists working independently or under the auspices of a paid arts program, such as the Old Town or Wells Street art fairs.

Since these arts-related community groups and activities garner the most publicity, they strongly influence participation in and perception of arts in Near North. For instance, when asked to identify artists, arts groups or activities in the area, residents would refer to churches such as Moody Bible, after school programs or established arts organizations like Old Town Triangle Association, justifying statements that “the churches do a lot of arts in the area,” “a lot of kids do art in summer programs or after school,” and “Old Town is where the arts are.”

In addition, residents who participated in informal art activities such as gardening, hair braiding, martial arts, songwriting, poetry composition and cooking did not consider themselves artists. Although these endeavors were observed among market rate, affordable and public housing residents alike, participants expressed that it was “silly” to do these activities with other people, let alone in an organized effort to purposefully bring together groups from different socioeconomic backgrounds. This is due to the fact that these activities are not considered legitimate art according to traditional definitions of art.

Three of the observed arts groups in the community actively engaged residents of all backgrounds in

their activities. Of these groups, two were churches and one was a grassroots children's program. One of the churches was located north of Division Street in Old Town, while the other two groups were located south of Division Street in Cabrini-Green. While the church in Cabrini-Green sought to bring market rate and public housing residents together through dance, and the children's program brought together artists of all backgrounds to instruct public housing youth, the church in Old Town incorporated a variety of art-related activities into its programming.

Based on the belief that their community was "very artistic," that the arts "brought residents of all backgrounds together," and that all art is "a form of worship," the Old Town pastor sought to incorporate adult arts activities into all aspects of her church. For instance, perceiving that there was a "lack of free exhibit space" in the community, the pastor opened up the sanctuary as a space for local artists to exhibit visual art. Some of the artists on display sold their paintings and others were offered opportunities to exhibit in a variety of venues in the city, such as the African American Cultural Center. The church also sponsors Sunday jazz workshops once a month. The pastor explained, "Musicians sit in on the service and respond to the community with music, it's all improv jazz." Characterizing the community as creative and artistic, she thought it was a good idea to incorporate the skills of her parish into worship. At the services, which attract residents of different races and ethnic groups, parishioners are given simple musical instruments and are encouraged to "dance and play."

Lastly, the church encourages performance groups to use their space to work or perform. Currently, two theatre groups rehearse in the space. The student pastor commented that she was looking for a theatre group to do a program for teenagers and was working on establishing a stronger music composition program. She added, "Parishioners have started coming to me saying 'I know someone who could do art in the church,' which is wonderful because it means that they're taking ownership of arts into the space. That was the original intent in the first place because art is worship, whether it has spiritual intention or not."

Following the research period, CCUC staff conducted an arts-involvement survey in North Town

Village to assess opportunities for arts-related resident social activities. Residents declared they are involved in everyday traditional arts activities such as tap dancing, acting, directing, painting, jewelry making, photography, creative writing and ceramics, as well as woodwork, quilting, cross-stitch, flower arranging, singing in the church choir, drumming and crocheting. Twenty-five percent of surveyed residents admitted that they were "very interested" in engaging in these activities within a group in North Town Village. Just as the jazz worship program used the arts to bring residents of different backgrounds together in a parish, so could mixed-income communities develop arts programming to facilitate interaction among their residents.

## Marked by Transition

In addition to facilitating interaction among disparate groups of people, market rate, affordable and public housing residents could also use the informal arts to create safe spaces as a means of overcoming misconceptions about each other and initiating dialogue about the changes in their community.

Before a performance by Chicago Dance Medium in Seward Park—a free, outreach dance program open to all residents—the choreographer took the stage. A banner draped across the space read "BITTERSWEET CHANGES." She pointed to the hanging and explained that the dancers had thought of this title for their performance "because there are so many changes happening around here and some are good and some are bitter."

Members of the audience nodded in agreement. Throughout pieces entitled "Transition," "Cold, Cold Feet" and "New Beginning," buildings were torn down and rebuilt, bodies invaded each other's space, and people sprouted upwards from the floor. Eventually each person grabbed a member from the audience and brought them onstage to dance. In the end, the performers held hands and trailed out of the space.

"Change" is a word deeply embedded into the identity of Near North. Most recorded perceptions of the neighborhood dealt with its transition. Responses included comments such as "it's all changing so fast," "a lot of people are moving" and "they're always building around here!" Most of the positive responses referred to

development opportunities, incoming high-end retailers and improvement of living conditions, while negative responses forecasted widespread homelessness and community dispersion among relocated public housing residents. Walking along Hudson past half-vacant Cabrini-Green mid-rises, a resident shook her head and muttered "People used to live in these buildings."

Environmental change, however, does not lead to community inaction. Most residents are engaged in activities that fight, propel or document the restructuring of the neighborhood. One public housing resident organized others in the area to plant gardens around Cabrini-Green, in part to spite speculators and developers. "People don't want us coming together," he explained, "because that would mean that there's a community here, and they don't want to think that because they want to tear the place down!" Similarly, the Cabrini-Green Local Advisory Council president ran in 2002 under the slogan "Election 2002, We're Here to Stay."

In contrast, other residents want to do everything they can to push the transformation, or what they call "beautification" of the neighborhood. One neighborhood association official was thrilled to see the cobblestone drawings of North Town Park, a Holsten development planned for the Cabrini-Green site. She confessed that she could not wait to see what other "exciting additions" will be made to the neighborhood, stressing that people now view Near North as "emergent," which is profitable to the area.

Others seek to understand and document the changes, rather than fight against or support them. In two instances, an artist gave Cabrini-Green children cameras to take pictures of meaningful places in their neighborhood. In one case, a cultural map was constructed of landmarks that the children considered part of their identity, such as a fast food stand, an elementary school, a church and a playground. Both artists hope to permanently exhibit their pictures in the neighborhood, capturing the way things were in a community slated for demolition.

When asked what their vision was for the area, most residents expressed that they wanted market rate, affordable and public housing residents to connect with one another. Many suggested ways that they thought people could best get to know each other. Some residents emphasized the need for a community space for people to be

able to meet and participate in activities with one another. "There's not enough space for community activities around here," one resident exclaimed. A Cabrini-Green official said that they were trying to reopen the Lower North Center, a place that "people can just go to." One artist looked forward to a center that a downtown church plans to establish in Cabrini-Green as a "place for people to connect."

Others trust that community events will be the catalyst through which residents will come to know one another. One woman stressed a need for community meetings where "people can get out their anger and cry and get out their stereotypes about one another." Another woman explained that when she lived in St. Louis, she "saw mixed-income housing there and they made it work [because of] people's willingness to break down myths." She asserted that if people overcome their misconceptions of one another, they will "live in a changed way."

Some people thought that residents would be able to get to know one another best in events centered on food. Although one resident wanted there to be a "big community barbeque," another envisioned a sit-down dinner where market rate, affordable and public housing residents would be forced to eat with one another.

Instead of organized events, most people stressed that residents need to take the initiative and invite each other over for dinner. One resident said, "I'm not going to say a certain event can be held that will bring this community together...community is created when people treat each other in the best possible way." Residents agreed that it was "just saying hi" to each other and "having respect for one another" that leads to community cohesion. In another example of how the arts can bring people together, children in one summer program drew a mural entitled "Connect to Respect." At the end of sessions, they would all hold hands and say, "One hand is to give, the other is to receive. One hand is to receive, the other is to give. Respect, love, and consideration for everyone!"

Despite holding different opinions about the means through which people should connect, most residents agreed that people have to start getting to know each other now, before it is too late. A Cabrini-Green resident explained, "We know how to be a community. We have to



teach the yuppies how to do it. You have all these yuppies minding their own business, not knowing who their neighbors are, but you never know when you're gonna need someone!"

## A Disclaimer

Although a variety of perspectives are presented in this report, it does not represent all of the residents in Near North. Most of the people interviewed were met within a community space or organization, factors that indicate a resident's use of and investment in a place. Many market rate residents did not seem to use the community except to sleep and eat. During rush hour in North Town Village, people would drive through the development and into their attached garages. It was difficult to find the spaces in the community that these residents used. A more discreet methodology, such as a survey, would be better suited to account for the perspectives of these residents. In all, more information was obtained from "old" rather than "new" residents, an indication in itself of differences in availability between the two groups.

Research results obtained from North Town Village represent a more partial portrait of the area than a conclusive report. Observations were made while walking through the development and at one Holsten-sponsored community event during the project period. Rarely was research conducted in the development after 7:30 p.m. While some mixed-income residents were interviewed informally in the community, future research would need to contact a greater sample to elucidate informed assumptions about their perceptions and use of the development, as well as their visions for the future. Additional research is necessary to make conclusive remarks about the use of space and extent of residents' interactions in the development.

The informal arts network in the area was tapped into only midway through the summer. With time, more arts activities and artists may have been discovered. Also, many of the residents were confused by the terms "arts" and "informal arts," and responses may have been limited as a result. A more inclusive word is needed in order to convey the breadth of creative activity.

## Some Things to Consider

In "Building Communities Inside and Out," Kretzman and McKnight (1993) stress the importance of using spatial and individual assets to strengthen a community. Management and residents in North Town Village and Near North need to use their assets as tools to break down community-building barriers, such as infrequent interaction among residents of different backgrounds and the lack of neutrally publicized, accessible public space. Not only does North Town Village contain large, well-kept spaces for community activity, but also residents are eager to get to know one another and participate in development events. In order to use these assets to strengthen the community by facilitating resident interaction—a crucial factor in sustaining mixed-income communities—management should work to increase the accessibility of community spaces and provide more events through which market rate, affordable and public housing residents can meet one another.

Holsten could allow the community rooms to be open to all residents and make the garden area on the north side of the complex a central, recreational space. Benches could be installed around the circular paths for residents to use to socialize with one another. Since residents revealed that people do not inspect the bulletin board outside the existing community rooms and have complained about ineffective event publicity, a small, covered bulletin board could be set up near the benches. This notice board could be used to inform residents of not only safety concerns, but also of events happening in the development and the Near North neighborhoods. Also, a small "resident of the month" section could be included so people would be able to meet one another indirectly and feel a part of their community.

In addition to planned children's activities, Holsten could use part of its \$4,000 resident social planning budget to arrange for at least one social event a month geared toward adults in the community. Since many residents agree that "food brings people together," such events could include a community cookout or an evening "wine and cheese." Also, Holsten could use the results of the arts-interest survey to provide opportunities for residents to express themselves creatively with one another.

It is hoped that Holsten Real Estate Group will use the information presented in this report to provide residents with opportunities to get to know one another and become invested in their environment, and that such research may also serve other mixed-income housing developments throughout the city. Although safety is an important consideration in a development surrounded by public housing projects and dependent on market rate investment, stability will only be obtained when residents can come together and overcome stereotypes about one another. A climate that fosters mutual respect and community investment is surely the most stable living environment.

In Near North, the community assets of existing multipurpose public space and informal arts activities need to be publicized effectively to provide a means through which old and new residents can come together. In order to move beyond the racial assumptions embedded by the neighborhoods "Old Town" and "Cabrini-Green," the area bounded by Chicago Avenue, Halsted Street, North Avenue, and Wells Street could be publicized as "Near North," an inclusive term without preconceived class or race compositions. Producing and distributing a community guide would clarify the geographic placement of the changing "Near North" community and supply descriptions and pictures of all public places, groups, and events. Arts groups seeking participants, volunteers, audience members or artists to use their space would be included. The guide would not only be distributed to the established community hubs of the YMCA, Dominick's, Seward Park and the Near North Library, but also to the six surrounding mixed-income communities of Orchard Park, Renaissance Park, North Town Village, Old Town Square, Mohawk North and Old Town Village.

Residents of Cabrini-Green who have lived in the area for almost fifty years must be respected to form a new sense of community identity. In order to overcome stereotypes and understand their neighborhood's history, residents need to be exposed to the meaningful stories, people and places of the area. Community associations could arrange walking tours led by longtime Cabrini-Green residents. Myths could be dispelled and historical identity validated through such tours, which would not only be a step towards creating a connective present, but

also a means of preserving and understanding a rich past. As a lifelong Cabrini-Green resident said, "Thank God we're so different from one another so we can learn from each other. What I don't know, you can teach me!"

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# Choosing Healthcare in South Chicago: Information Strategies and Provider Choices

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## Introduction

We sat on the maroon plastic chairs neatly placed in a row in the waiting room of the South Chicago Maternal and Family Clinic. Time ticked, 1:00, 1:15, 1:30, and “People’s Court” blared on the television. A girl of about ten played Nintendo in the back of the room. In our hands were bags of colorfully illustrated pamphlets on the services offered by the clinic, about four pounds of it. We dutifully noted the comings and goings in our field journals. There was a roughly even mix of Latino and African American clients, predominantly women and children with a few men present. There was some coming and going among the clients as time passed, but persistently perched on the desk to our left was a piece of paper with the words “out to lunch” written in marker.

It was not particularly crowded, and the office was clean and well lit. Nearly every inch of wall was covered with signs or pamphlets. Some were posters on topics like healthy pregnancy and high blood pressure, some were missing persons flyers, and others instructions such as “how to wash your hands,” each alongside their Spanish equivalents. The preponderance of communiqués began their advisements with “NO.” No strollers beyond this point. No profanity. No eating or drinking. Do not go beyond this point until your name has been called. We were waiting for our first interview of our summer ethnographic field project, which was to be with Jerome,<sup>i</sup> a staff member, who was forty-five minutes behind schedule.

Jerome was busy pitching in to help clients because the clinic was short staffed. We later discovered that the Illinois Department of Public Health had cut its staff from

2,000 to 1,600 employees and was trying to “do more with less.” Public health personnel had very little time to devote to providing interviews. We were eventually granted several opportunities to have discussions with staff at the South Chicago facility after the initial attempt, but this first appointment was illustrative of the experience many residents have at the clinic, which has felt the recent cutbacks.

## South Chicago

South Chicago stretches south from 79th Street to 95th Street, and runs westward from Lake Michigan to South Chicago Avenue. This area was a center for steel and other manufacturing industries from the 1870s through the late 1960s. During the 1970s, layoffs began at the steel mills, and ended with the snuffing of the last remaining USX South Works smoke stack in 1992. This sent the neighborhood into an economic recession, which is still being felt today (Vaughn and Leslie 1995).

In 1890, half of South Chicago’s population was foreign-born. This community continues to be a gateway for immigrants, although the countries of origin are in constant flux and economic opportunities are fewer than what they were forty years ago (Vaughn and Leslie 1995). The newest immigrants to the area include Haitians, whereas immigration from Mexico has slowed in recent years compared to earlier influx rates. There has been an infusion of African Americans from other areas of the city, which has made African Americans the only ethnic group to increase as a percentage of South Chicago’s population



between 1990 and 2000, from 60 percent to 68 percent (US Census Bureau 2000). During the same period, the Latino population shrank from 34 percent to 27 percent (US Census Bureau 2000).

According to its 2003 Illinois School Report Card, 97.8 percent of the children at South Chicago's Arnold Mireles Academy are classified as low-income. However, there is hope for economic renewal. The 573-acre lakefront site of USX South Works is in the process of being sold and redeveloped with parks and new homes planned. It is within this neighborhood context that *Centro Comunitario Juan Diego* (Juan Diego Community Center) is taking steps to see that residents benefit from the development and are not simply displaced by it, while also fulfilling their primary goal of improving the community's health.

## Centro Comunitario Juan Diego (CCJD)

Incorporated in 1994 by a group of eight Mexican women, *Centro Comunitario Juan Diego* is a welcoming and inclusive grassroots organization. Most of the volunteers and staff are former food pantry recipients who live in South Chicago, and the executive director lives two blocks from the center. Particularly among Latinos, CCJD is known and trusted. A survey on healthcare was conducted by CCJD in early 2003, and within two weeks they collected 170 responses via their own network of volunteers and clients. Ninety-two percent chose to take the survey in Spanish, and only 18 percent reported being born in the U.S. Sixty percent of the respondents reported having no health insurance. The survey asked questions that were of a personal nature, including medical history and type of insurance. Eighty-one percent chose to give their names on this survey, 78 percent chose to give their addresses and 67 percent chose to give their phone numbers, demonstrating high levels of trust in the center.

CCJD offers a variety of services, including low cost car seats for children, a food pantry, free clothing, and asthma, diabetes and HIV/AIDS classes. They also provide English as a Second Language and computer classes for adults and children. They pride themselves on being able to provide these

services with very little funding because of their strong spirit of volunteerism and commitment to the South Chicago community. This earns them credibility because, as an organization, they are perceived as understanding the residents as they struggle with maintaining a low budget and making money stretch as far as they possibly can. Staff members have often taken pay cuts in order to preserve their programs. At the same time, this approach to finances distances them from other organizations, which are seen by CCJD as having very large budgets, yet providing less assistance to the community.

CCJD's core service is the *Promotores de Salud* (Health Promoters). The health promoter model of care is active across the United States and in Latin America within communities that lack full access to traditional health care. Under this model, local people are educated about various health issues and trained to disseminate this information and, in some cases, actually treat and screen fellow community members. Health promoters are also called community health workers, community health advocates, lay health educators, community health representatives, peer health promoters, community health out-



photo by Maria Campos

reach workers, and in Spanish, *promotores de salud*.

At CCJD the *promotores* are trained by professionals from organizations like the Red Cross, the Indian Health Service, the American Lung Association and the Chicago Department of Health. This type of intervention

addresses the immediate need for culturally and linguistically competent healthcare workers. People who belong to traditionally marginalized minority groups are more likely to trust information from people in their own community, rather than outsiders. This is due to an insider's ability to operate within the cultural framework and communicate with the people they are servicing. The *Promotores de Salud* engage in direct outreach by doing presentations and going door-to-door to learn the needs of community members. "When you're in their home, they talk to you like a friend," said one health promoter. "It's better because they are more comfortable and will open up to you more about their needs."

## Methods

Our research was conducted during a nine-week summer internship at the Field Museum's Center for Cultural Understanding and Change (CCUC) as part of the 2003 Urban Research and Curriculum Transformation Institute. The museum partnered with *Centro Comunitario Juan Diego* to develop research questions important to community health and advocacy in South Chicago. Through a series of meetings with CCUC staff, it was decided that the research program would explore how people were getting healthcare information, making choices and evaluating the care they received in South Chicago.

We used a combination of participant observation, semi-structured and structured interviewing as our data collection methods. We were able to contact the majority of the participants vis-à-vis their participation in CCJD programs while some impromptu interviews were conducted with people who were already at CCJD. Interviews were generally held in a private location that was conven-



photo of interns and partners by Ivan Watkins

ient to the participant. In addition to CCJD as a source of informants, a local job-training program allowed us to contact their program participants. Ericka's interviews averaged fifteen minutes and were conducted with twenty-seven adults and one child (who acted both as interpreter for her mother and respondent) from the South Chicago area. Ericka conducted interviews in English, twice with a Spanish translator, which limited the sample of her potential respondents to individuals with fluent or nearly fluent English skills. Interviews were conducted in a conversational style. Respondents were first asked a series of open-ended questions about their healthcare choices and history of experiences, and then four basic areas of healthcare were explored: home healthcare, emergency care, chronic care and wellness. Table 1 shows the demographic breakdown of the people with whom we held semi-structured interviews. Because it is one of the most important factors in determining where individuals go for healthcare, information about insurance coverage among our respondents is also included in Tables 1 and 2.

**TABLE 1: Semi-Structured Interview Respondents (N = 28)**

Median Age	40
Median Years in South Chicago	8
Sex	36% Male 64% Female
Race, Ethnicity and Nationality	12 African American (All U.S. Native) 10 Latino 7 Mexican (4 U.S. born and 3 Mexican born) 2 Puerto Rican 1 Unknown 4 Haitian 1 White (U.S. Native) 1 Arab (Palestinian from Israel)
Immigrants	39%
Insurance (discussed with 25 respondents)	13 Governmental Insurance Programs 4 Illinois KidCare 1 Medicaid 1 Medicare and Medicaid 3 Public Aid Medical Card 2 Public Aid Medical Card and HMO 4 Private Insurance 6 No Insurance, 24%

Andrea focused on structured interviews, which averaged five minutes. These interviews were conducted in various locations. The majority took place on the streets, and the rest were conducted inside local grocery

stores, laundry mats and Walgreens. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions with direct focus on perceptions of health, healthcare choices and healing techniques. Most of the interviews were in Spanish and translated into English by Andrea. Table 2 shows the demographic breakdown of the individuals who participated in structured interviews.

**TABLE 2: Structured Interview Respondents (N = 53)**

Median Age	38
Median Years in South Chicago	4.5
Sex	30% Male, 70% Female
Race, Ethnicity and Nationality	46 Latino 40 Mexican 1 Ecuadorian 1 Guatemalan 4 Unknown 8 African American (All U.S. Natives)
Insurance (discussed with 50 respondents)	66% uninsured

Because of our sampling methods and primary contacts, as well as the gender and ethnicity of the researchers, both women and Latinos were heavily represented as a proportion of the sample size for our research. Therefore, our findings should not be considered representative of all groups within the community. A statistically random and representative sample, although desirable, would not guarantee the types of information we were seeking. Within the parameters of this research project, our focus on the available people with whom we shared some measure of rapport and trust, either due to our common background or our association with CCJD, was an effective means of obtaining data that provide interpretative value. The sensitive nature of medical information requires some measure of trust and this was valued more highly by the researchers than the demographic profiles of respondents.

**TABLE 3**

Total Respondents (N = 81)		South Chicago, 2000 Census Data (N=38,608)	
Age	68% under 44	Age	71% under 44
Sex	68% Female 32% Male	Sex	54% Female 46% Male
Race/ Ethnicity	25% African American 68% Latino 7% Other	Race/ Ethnicity	68% African American 27% Latino 5% Other

As we became more familiar with the healthcare system, South Chicago, the existing literature and our initial research findings, we focused on the following questions:

- How are South Chicago residents getting information about health and wellness care, and how are neighborhood organizations disseminating information about their services?
- When services are available, how are people making decisions? What is the perceived quality of care?
- Where are people in South Chicago getting health-care?

## Finding Out About Healthcare Options

Data were collected on how people received information about the healthcare services that they currently use. We observed several instances where people found out about healthcare services through referrals or signage. Asking how an interviewee found out about a certain service was extremely important, considering how much money and time is spent on disseminating information about services. We wanted to find out more about what forms of outreach are most effective in finally convincing a person to use a medical service that they may or may not have heard about before. This aspect of our project could be conceived of as market research for medical services.

Both the service providers and the residents agreed that there was a lack of reliable health service information in the community, particularly for local services. Some residents believe that more outreach needs to be done, while some service providers, due to shrinking budgets, have made budget cuts to preserve core services. Many local services, including those of CCJD, depend on short-term grant funding from private and government agencies, which can be an unstable source according to many such organizations.

Many of the residents who have attempted to educate themselves on the available healthcare options indicate that services promoted in literature distributed within the community are actually more limited than what the material suggests. For example, many services are unavailable to undocumented immigrants or they require so much paperwork that most potential service recipients become frustrated with the bureaucracy and simply give up. Other services are promoted, yet when



potential patients come to the provider they are not told about the service. Discouraging experiences like these have resulted in patients feeling they need to “stand up for their rights.” This means arguing with the service staff about perceived unreasonable policies, and with doctors about the quality of their care. Those who adopt this stance seem satisfied that it is effective. One lifetime South Chicagoan who was disabled said:

You have to speak up for your rights. I had one doctor there [at Mercy Hospital] and every time I asked about some kind of new treatment he responded negatively, and I said, ‘why do you always respond negatively’, and I was upset. So then Dr. Williams came in and he said he’d be my new doctor. He listens to me.

Despite challenges, the people we spoke with were getting information and choosing among the healthcare options available to them.

## Word of Mouth

Most commonly, people found out about a service they now use through direct interaction with another person whom they know. Friends or family who actually used the service in question were the most frequently cited sources of reliable information. This involves a slow process of building trust between many individual clients and the service provider so that the client will feel comfortable recommending the services he or she receives to friends and family. Only long established services enjoy this free and effective form of promotion.

One well known health service option is Cook County Hospital, which has been operating in the Near West Side for over a hundred years. Despite being located fourteen miles away from South Chicago, Cook County Hospital is so well known to members of this community that when Ericka asked people how they “found out about” it, she got a few baffled looks. One man who has lived his whole life in South Chicago said he has been going to Cook County Hospital since he was born. “You know, my mom not being on my father’s insurance,” he explained, “[Cook County] is a ways to go, but it’s free.” Because publicly-funded Cook County Hospital is required to help those in need even if they lack insurance, positive word on the street serves as its own advertising

campaign. The South Chicago Clinic (SCC) is another facility that does not formally advertise its services or publicize a health agenda within the greater community. People are likely to find out about SCC through word of mouth, including doctor referrals, or simply passing by it.

## Provider-Initiated Outreach

Many different strategies are used to promote healthcare services, which vary dramatically from organization to organization. El Valor’s Children and Family Center in South Chicago, for example, uses health fairs, flyers, videos and community partnerships with other organizations to get the word out about their services, which include Head Start daycare facilities, health screenings and parenting classes. Staff members of El Valor are also active on the boards of other organizations and they spread the word about their programs through this network of service providers.

Several respondents indicated that they found out about services through promotional efforts of the provider. Some of these sources include television commercials, health fairs and announcements at church. Flyers were not cited by anyone as the primary way they found out about a service they use. In several instances, flyers were mentioned in conjunction with word of mouth interactions or announcements as auxiliary aids to finding the service.

Among participants interviewed, we found that people were just as likely to have “walked by” local services as to have found out by all provider-initiated promotional efforts combined, including flyers, announcements and health fairs. The simple act of having a presence at street level with a sign out front and a receptionist is a powerful marketing tool in this community. Although it was beyond the scope of the research project to determine why this is the case, the research findings suggest that organizations should use their exterior space to the fullest to take advantage of passersby, which would increase walk-in utilization of services.

## Making Decisions

### *What is Healthcare?*

It is common to think of healthcare providers as limited to modern Western medical facilities that treat disease,

such as the doctor's office, the hospital or the clinic. However, our focus was more holistic. The grocery store and the food pantry that provide nutrition are a component of health care. There are over the counter medications, home remedies and traditional healers to consider, as well as health education, outreach and exercise. Indeed, within South Chicago, these additional factors may play as important if not more important a role than traditionally recognized avenues of health care. Our objective was to see which facilities, both inside and outside South Chicago, were being used by the residents and why. Our study was a preliminary step in understanding how people in this community conceive of health, how they find out about health information and how they make healthcare decisions.

### What is Health?

According to the Chicago Department of Public Health's website, "Health is more than the absence of disease. Health is physical, mental, and social well-being." But this

definition is not intended to be, nor is it actually a reflection of the public view. For the vast majority of our sample, being healthy simply means that one feels good and is able to perform daily activities such as work. This finding is supported by prior research conducted in a Mexican-American community, which states that health is associated with a state of being and directly translates to feeling free of pain, being able to perform one's activities and being happy (Torre 2001).

Our findings for African Americans and Latinos in the community were largely similar. The concept of health as a condition of moment-to-moment wellness may explain several incidences where we had people telling us, "I'm a healthy person" even though in one case, the person had suffered a stroke, continued to have high blood pressure and obesity, was anemic and had lost or pulled all of her teeth. The public and the health professionals are working with two different definitions of what a healthy person is, and this disjuncture must be recognized before such a gap can be bridged.

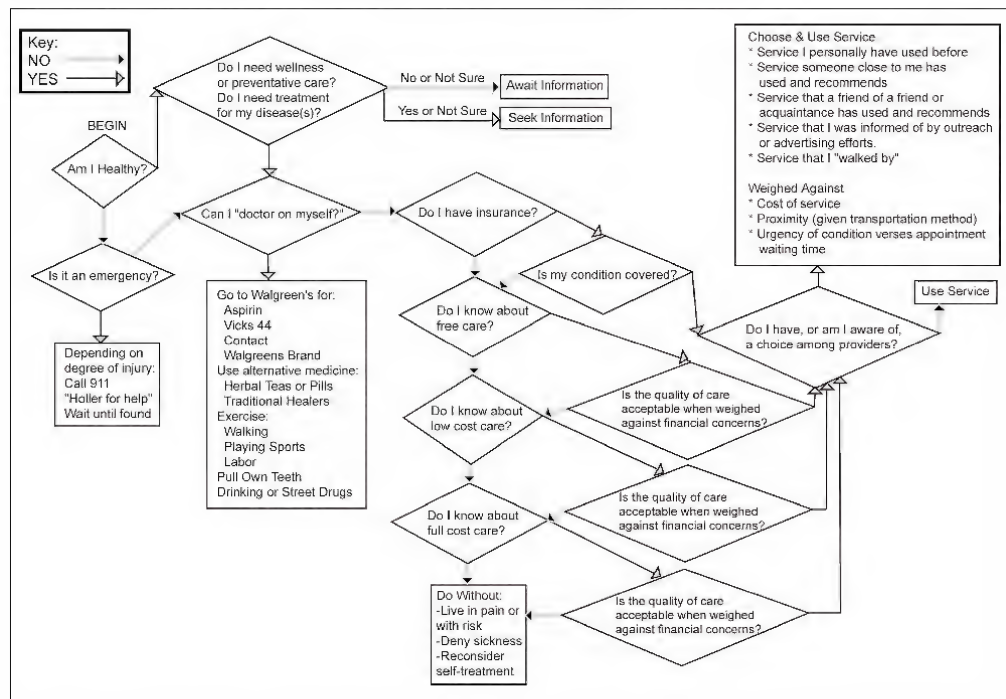


Figure 1: The health decision-making process for South Chicagoans<sup>11</sup>. figure by Ericka Menchen and Andrea Rincon

## *Prevention*

Another decision that people make concerning their health, within the limitations imposed by larger socioeconomic forces, is whether to engage in prevention-related efforts. The Chicago Department of Public Health wants to spread the message that people can stay healthy if they use preventative care. This has been, and will continue to be, a very difficult message to communicate. Changing the public's perception of what health is and what it means to be healthy cannot be done only from "the top down," but must include "ground up" efforts as well. The intended audience for these public health messages must be involved in their dissemination because of the fundamental change in perceptions of health that is required.

We found that the majority of people we came in contact with were awaiting information, as depicted in Figure 1. They feel that they are healthy because they may not be experiencing an illness at the time. They are not actively seeking treatment or further information on health. They may know that they are overweight, or have high blood pressure, or that they should have a mammogram and would be receptive to information about these issues, but they do not consider themselves "unhealthy." They simply may not have the mental energy to take on another problem, even if they are informed about the connection between unhealthy habits and long-term health effects.

Socioeconomic factors also have a direct negative impact on the health of the poor. A visit to the clinic, an all day affair, is to be avoided because as much time as possible is needed for work. "The only thing that I want is to be healthy so I can go back to work," said Jose while recuperating from a work-related injury. Research shows that "low-income, substandard housing, inadequate or unsanitary living facilities, lack of formal education...discrimination, poor nutrition, and stress can and do affect the health of Mexican Americans" (Torre 2001:25). Improvement in the economic conditions would have a direct benefit on the health of residents.

One of the most significant health problems for minority communities today is obesity. During our research, Mexican immigrants, in particular, reported problems maintaining a healthy weight in the United States. This has also been the experience of many immigrants who work or volunteer at CCJD. They cite the

freshness of food in Mexico and the lack of preservatives in contrast to dietary choices here. A recent survey of South Chicago grocery stores found that out of twenty-eight stores selling food, only nine sell fresh fruit and ten sell fresh vegetables, but the majority of stores sell neither (Ramirez 2002). Obesity "is a primary modifiable risk factor for the development of diabetes, heart disease, cerebrovascular disease [stroke and high blood pressure], and cancer" (Torre 2001:33). Organizations, including CCJD and Health South Chicago, are addressing this problem by attempting to educate South Chicago residents about responsible dietary practices. CCJD targets obesity with nutrition education, exercise classes and preventative screening. One program is promoting healthy recipes using healthy Mexican foods such as nopales (cactus).

## *Self-Treatment*

Based on the interviews we conducted, the first preference for treatment of non-emergency conditions was some form of self-treatment, sometimes referred to by African Americans as "doctoring on myself." Depending on the condition, self-treatment ranged from lemon tea with honey (the most frequently cited cold remedy) to pulling one's own teeth, to alcohol and drug use. Walgreens was often mentioned by name as the primary retailer where self-treatment remedies can be purchased.

If the individual perceives their condition is serious and feels that additional treatment is needed, they will most likely seek the care of a doctor or nurse. Initially we hypothesized that the use of alternative medicine would be prevalent in South Chicago because of insufficient medical services. However, the people we talked to said that they primarily use private doctors, clinics and/or hospitals to treat disease and illness. Several interviews with administrators in the public health system in South Chicago indicate that despite the recent cutbacks, medical services still are available for a substantial proportion of low-income and undocumented residents. Most people reported not knowing any local healers and not using herbal healing techniques, except in the case of colds. This finding applies to all participating ethnic groups.

We did find a few residents who use alternative medicine, including some of our primary contacts, but not to the exclusion of Western medicine. There is a possibility that people did not feel comfortable telling us that they

**Table 4: Frequently Accessed Facilities**

Name	CTA Route/Miles (from center of South Chicago)	Payment & Service Information
Chicago Family Health Center 9119 S. Exchange Ave.	In South Chicago	Sliding Scale Available, Non-emergency care
South Chicago Clinic 2938 East 89th Street	In South Chicago	Sliding Scale Available, Non-emergency care, only pediatrics and women's health
Cook County Hospital 1901 W. Harrison Street	Downtown Chicago, CTA: 87 bus to Red Line @ 87th to Jackson, to Blue Line Forrest Park to Medical Center and walk South 1 block 14.06 miles	Free to those without means, Emergency care, surgery, specialists
Advocate Trinity Hospital 2320 East 93rd St.	In neighboring Calumet Heights CTA: 27 bus 1.4 miles	Private Hospital, charges more to those without insurance. Emergency care, surgery, specialists
Centro Comunitario Juan Diego 8812 S. Commercial Ave.	In South Chicago	Almost all services are free

used alternative medicine because key informants with strong ties to the community stated that alternative medical practices are very prevalent.

## Where People Go

South Chicago is very much a part of the city. Several Chicago Transit Authority busses, two Metra commuter rail line stops and a nearby highway provide transportation to downtown. Although feelings about the adequacy and availability of transportation vary, many residents travel to other locations on the South Side and downtown to receive healthcare services. People travel to use these services for a variety of reasons, including cost, quality of care and continuity of care. Because we found that the majority of residents use hospitals, clinics or private doctors, we began documenting specific information about the facilities and services being used. Table 4 lists the four facilities most frequently accessed by residents according to our research.

The facility most frequently visited by the people we spoke to was the Chicago Family Health Center (CFHC). We found the CFHC to be a more likely facility for Latino people to visit if they are ill and seeking professional medical attention in our sample than other clinics or hospitals. The staff and doctor at CFHC speak Spanish fluently, and Latino clients claim that they are satisfied with the care they receive at this facility. Another advantage of CFHC to members of the Latino community is that their sliding scale program does not require patients to provide a

Social Security number, which opens the door for undocumented and low-income immigrants to receive care. Among our sample, diabetes care was the most frequently used service of the clinic. Reports of the quality of care received at CFHC varied greatly, from "very bad treatment and I'll never go back," to "very good, they are nice there." Our interviews and survey data collected by CCJD indicated that overall satisfaction was better for CFHC than all other facilities discussed by informants.

The South Chicago Clinic (SCC), part of the Chicago Department of Health, was also frequently cited as a preferred non-emergency care center by the respondents to our survey. Our data shows that African Americans are happier with SCC's services than are Latinos. SCC's staff is mostly African American, and so are two of their five physicians. (Two physicians are Pacific Islanders and one is European.) Studies have shown that "racial concordance between patient and physician is associated with greater patient satisfaction and higher self-rated quality of care" (Betancourt and King 2000:871). Several people we talked to complained about extremely long waiting periods for appointments and in the office. Most patients we interviewed said that their average wait was between two and four hours after they had arrived for their appointment, and this was confirmed by the survey done by CCJD. The SCC's staff members are aware of this persistent problem and are trying to make administrative changes to solve it.

A key resource and "safety net" for the poor throughout the city is Cook County Hospital. It is the



opinion of the vast majority of patients that County has good doctors, but waiting, especially with an emergency, can be a very painful and traumatic experience. Yet the uninsured have few other options. "I waited from six at night to eight a.m. in the emergency room of Cook County with a broken leg," said one CCJD staff member and longtime South Chicago resident. Access to care at Cook County Hospital is very limited for new patients. The waiting period for a first time non-emergency appointment was three months at the time of this study.

Advocate Trinity Hospital (Trinity) was the emergency facility most frequently visited by participants in the study who had insurance. Although it is not within the boundary of South Chicago, it is the closest hospital and most accessible for residents taking public transportation. We found both positive and negative evaluations from Trinity patients, but the majority of respondents had negative opinions about the care they received there. The negative comments were not generally limited to the administrative staff as they were with most other facilities, but included misdiagnoses and poor bedside manners on the part of the doctors. Javier, a volunteer at CCJD said, "They treat you like nobody. My daughter had a neck pain, you know kids, so we took her to the hospital and the doctor said 'What are you wasting my time for? There is nothing wrong with her.' But she was in pain, so we went to the clinic (CFHC) and they gave her a neck brace to wear for a few days and some drugs."

*Centro Comunitario Juan Diego* does not provide direct treatment services, but it does serve as a key health resource for its clients. They focus on education, prevention and try to provide screening services for diseases such as HIV/AIDS, diabetes, high blood pressure and breast cancer by partnering with local hospitals and clinics. Latinas in particular feel comfortable at CCJD because the majority of the staff and leadership are from their ethnic group. Because CCJD was our base of operations, a much greater proportion of the people we talked to knew and used CCJD's services than the community-at-large. The general feeling of CCJD leadership was that most people on the street do not know about them, but among those who do know of them they are well regarded and trusted.

Other facilities include the University of Chicago Hospitals, Michael Reese Hospitals, South Shore

Hospital, Jackson Park Hospital, the South Chicago YMCA, the city clinics in Roseland and Englewood, and several private doctors and dentists. Our research found that people go far and wide to seek medical care for a number of reasons. New residents wanted to keep their doctors who were located in other parts of the city from which they had moved. Long-term residents had seen their doctors move to other areas, and some had become "fed up" with local facilities. Healthcare decisions are complex and each individual weighs the variables differently (see Figure 1).

## Medical Insurance, Provider Choices and Obstacles

The people of South Chicago have limited options for treatment due to restrictions within their insurance policies (including government programs and HMOs), lack of physical mobility, lack of money (for treatment and transportation), perceived lack of quality care at particular providers, lack of information and language barriers. There are many government programs intended to provide insurance for those with low incomes, and the majority of the semi-structured interviewees had health-care coverage under some form of government-sponsored insurance plan. There are also many people who do not fall into the categories of income and parental status, or lack documentation that would enable them to qualify for these programs. Others we interviewed do not know about health programs available to them or prefer not to use government services.

Several times uninsured participants in the study told us that they have one provider option, Cook County Hospital, which is used in the case of an emergency. Although other facilities will take them, there is usually at least a minimum payment required up front before services are rendered, and some places, such as the Advocate family of hospitals, charge the uninsured much more than they charge insurance companies, who have collective bargaining power (Knowles 2003).

Some individuals combine both public and private insurance by using HMO programs that are available to supplement the coverage provided by public aid, although evaluations of the effectiveness of this type of coverage are mixed. One woman, who consistently calls

the HMO 800 number to seek information about which doctors to see, stated she is very happy with her coverage. Another woman, who felt she was signed up for the HMO against her will, indicated she was upset with the restrictions on where her primary care provider is located.

One longtime South Chicago resident was amazed at the difference a (PPO) medical insurance policy made in terms of her access to care. "I got insurance two years ago, and I never had it before," she said. "Now that I have it all the doctors are lining up. For my shoulder, no one wanted to see me. Now everyone wants me. I get letters from University of Chicago and Trinity wanting me as a patient." Because insurance is such a strong determinant of healthcare access, impartial guidance on insurance options is needed in this community where many residents qualify for government subsidized programs.

In addition to insurance related issues, healthcare providers in South Chicago face the extra obstacle of caring for a population in tremendous demographic flux. Undocumented immigrants, said one community expert, stay an average of three years before returning to their country of origin or moving out of the area. Although it is difficult to estimate the number of undocumented immigrants in South Chicago, undocumented workers account for approximately 5 percent of the Chicago metro area labor market and represent a growing segment of the low-wage workforce (Mehta at al. 2002). The Chicago Housing Authority has also been seeking to decentralize public housing by tearing down large high-rise facilities and offering vouchers that can be used around the city for rent (CHA 2003). This has led to an infusion of former high-rise public housing residents to South Chicago. The constant fluctuation of services offered and the residents themselves make the information flow less seamlessly than in more affluent and stable neighborhoods.

Language barriers also present significant challenges for some residents. Cook County Hospital, for example, lacks sufficient bilingual staff. On one occasion, when Andrea was working at CCJD she overheard Laura, a staff member, being hung up on by someone. She asked Laura what was going on and she said that she was trying to schedule a new date for her surgery, which had been canceled. The staff member at Cook County hung up on her because Laura only speaks Spanish. Andrea offered to translate for her, called the hospital and talked to an

extremely unhelpful person who said that nobody on staff was bilingual and no one could help Laura reschedule over the phone, even with a translator. The obstacles to effective healthcare, including a lack of resources (e.g. insurance), a changing population, language barriers and frustration within the community are clear. In spite of these barriers, people are actively pursuing the improvement of their health when they feel treatment is needed.

## Recommendations and Conclusion

As residents and healthcare services undergo constant change, the lack of complete and timely information about the nature of these services in the community will continue to be a challenge. However, appropriate interventions—grounded in people's existing information-gathering strategies—can help to improve the situation. Based on our research, we recommend that services make full use of the communicative potential of their exterior space. Bold, bilingual signage with very large type containing few words and readable by a casual passerby from the sidewalk may catch the attention of those "awaiting information," whereas smaller flyers, which require a close reading on the part of the recipients, may not. Flyers can be important secondary sources of information for individuals interested in receiving healthcare information, but should be distributed from within the doors of the facility. More importantly, bilingual staff must be available to competently answer questions about the services provided at the facility.

Once people find out about their options, the decision-making process can be very complex with many personal factors weighed. People often consider themselves healthy even when they have been diagnosed with a disease, as long as they do not feel ill and are able to perform day-to-day activities. Many people feel that unless they are physically impeded by illness, their health is not a priority compared to other struggles they face on a daily basis. The healthcare decision-making process is only important to them when daily activities are affected.

The majority of South Chicago residents use some form of self-treatment as a first option and some may use alternative medicines, but our findings in this area were inconclusive. Many travel long distances to other facilities when local services are perceived as inaccessible or unde-

sirable. Most Latinos go to Chicago Family Health Center because they have bilingual staff and their sliding scale program does not require a Social Security number. SCC was often preferred by the African American population we sampled, possibly because of the racial concordance between patient and physician/staff. Cook County Hospital and Advocate Trinity Hospital were also frequently mentioned as important emergency resources, but were criticized for long waiting periods and staff who have difficulties effectively communicating in a multilingual environment. Although transportation is perceived as a problem for many, there are other clinics and hospitals used by South Chicago residents across the Chicago area.

Our research findings indicated that most South Chicago residents consider health to be a condition of the moment, over which they have little control. Most informants did not expend much effort on preventative care or disease treatment if they considered themselves healthy. For the layperson, health is not the long-term holistic conception that health professionals tend to use. Getting the word out about specific prevention efforts is one way to begin the process of changing common perceptions about healthcare. Human interaction is key to the promotional effort because people trust word of mouth more than other methods of information dissemination. In South Chicago, *Centro Comunitario Juan Diego* is one community organization that is taking steps to empower residents in their healthcare decisions through educative outreach and personal connections.

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i All names have been changed. Some quotes edited to maintain anonymity.

ii Figure 1 represents the typical healthcare decision-making process for the South Chicago residents we interviewed. If the interviewees felt they were healthy, they would passively accept health information, but generally not seek it. If the interviewees were not healthy, the first consideration was the severity of the illness. If it was considered very serious, such as a likely broken bone, most said they would call 911 for an ambulance. If it was not considered very serious, self-treatment options were considered. If the condition did not respond to self-administered treatments or if the illness was more severe, the person would seek further medical attention. The person's level of insurance coverage is the primary determining factor in assessing costs. After the cost decision comes the process of finding out about providers as described above. Lastly, people make a decision and receive care.

# From the Ground Up: Vacant Lots and Community Involvement in Englewood

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## Introduction

This research project was conducted as part of the 2004 Urban Research and Curriculum Transformation Institute of the Center for Cultural Understanding and Change in collaboration with Imagine Englewood if...! (IEi). IEi is a grassroots collective of concerned Englewood citizens who work to inspire neighborhood change through their mission of collaboration, communication and connection. Ms. Jean Carter-Hill was the IEi representative who worked most closely with us to coordinate our research efforts.

For this project, we took an asset-based participatory action research (PAR) approach to fieldwork. PAR enables researchers to work collaboratively with community partners to identify a neighborhood's strengths and to develop a feasible plan for using these strengths to affect social change at the community level (Wali 2004; Whyte 1991). Working in Englewood with IEi and using a combination of fieldwork methods, we found that unowned vacant lots in the neighborhood were invaluable assets to the community. In the face of myriad issues, among them rapid redevelopment and environmental contamination, residents have transformed vacant lots from liabilities into assets.

Our survey showed that 13 to 33 percent of land in Englewood is vacant, mostly due to abandoned homes that have been demolished. Most community members expressed disgust at the number and condition of vacant lots, and would prefer that "anything" be developed on these properties rather than leave them "just sitting there." While most respondents insisted that nothing positive happens on vacant lots, we found a number of posi-

tive activities taking place: children playing games, street vendors selling sno-cones or hot dogs, and organizations displaying art by local youth. Of most interest to our project were residents who were maintaining vegetable or flower gardens on lots they did not own. Several of these residents have been taking care of unowned lots for many years. Throughout the community, these gardens are considered a positive asset because they offer residents a constructive activity, provide fresh produce where large grocery stores are not accessible and promote healthy lifestyles. Moreover, residents believe that caring for one's

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property or nearby vacant lots, either by maintaining gardens or simply keeping the lot clean, demonstrates an investment in the community. IEi, in conjunction with the Chicago Botanic Garden and the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, has been planning the development of its own community garden near Nicholson Elementary School, which would function as an outdoor classroom, recreation and relaxation space, and neighborhood beautification project. In this context, our study of vacant lot gardens and community involvement was especially appropriate.

We found that a number of factors are involved in



whether or not residents participate in community gardening and other neighborhood outreach projects: lack of communication between residents who own and rent their homes, stereotypes that children and teens are not responsible enough to help, the deterioration of once-thriving block clubs, and maintenance requirements. On the other hand, people are motivated to help the community when they feel a sense of ownership in a given project, when an alternative to negative activity is provided, when the work is done communally, and when organizations are able to pool their resources. Based on our findings, our recommendations include ways IEi can use the three cornerstones of their organization's mission—collaboration, communication and connection—to initiate community-based projects and encourage others to get involved in gardening and other community improvement endeavors.

## Methods

Participatory action research (PAR) takes a unique approach to anthropological fieldwork. Unlike a number of the field's research methods, PAR centralizes collaboration and researchers work directly with individuals in the community being studied. This is particularly effective in projects where anthropological research is intended to provide a community with tools that will influence improvement efforts or policy-making decisions. PAR emphasizes resident input and encourages locals to contribute information that will prove most useful and feasible to them and their community. In this way, academic and local knowledge are combined to successfully address a community's concerns (Wali 2004; Whyte 1991).

Additionally, PAR takes an asset-based approach to cultures, communities and individuals in the study site. These assets may be physical, such as a new park; individual, such as a resident's horticultural knowledge; or group-based, such as an active non-profit organization. By focusing on a community's assets, researchers and their community partners develop a plan that utilizes these already available resources to strengthen the community (Wali 2004).

Over the course of a nine-week research period, we focused on a specific area within Englewood between 59th Street to 67th Street on the north and south and

Halsted Street to Ashland Avenue on the east and west. Initially, we conducted informal interviews with people referred to us by Jean Carter-Hill, our collaborative partner from IEi. After a few weeks, we shifted our focus to talking to residents of Englewood whom we happened to meet in the neighborhood, stopping to chat with them on their porches, in public parks or on the sidewalk. In general, we asked respondents about their neighborhood's strengths, vacant lots and community involvement. We talked more specifically with residents who maintained a vacant lot, asking them in particular about how they started the project and why they stay involved. The names of all informants have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

Participant observation enabled us to develop a strong sense of the community and notice the everyday workings of its residents. We attended the alderman's monthly ward meeting, community awareness meetings, garden club meetings, community gardening events and Gospelfest, the neighborhood's largest and most anticipated annual event. Finally, near the end of our fieldwork, we volunteered in one resident's garden for two days, pulling weeds and spreading woodchips. After talking with Englewood residents all summer about maintaining vacant lots and community gardens, it was invaluable to actually participate in one of these projects.

## Neighborhood Context

Englewood is located seven miles south of downtown Chicago. It is bounded by Garfield Boulevard to the north, 75th Street to the south, State Street to the east, and Hamilton Avenue to the west. Together, the neighborhoods of Englewood and West Englewood have a population of approximately 98,000, 98 percent of which is African American. Annexed by Chicago in 1889, Englewood is the second oldest African American community in the city. Chicago's Columbian Exposition spurred significant development in Englewood between 1893 and 1907. Residential and commercial development flourished in these decades, and infrastructure for the region's transportation system was established. During the 1930s, because of convenient public transportation, the area surrounding 63rd and Halsted streets in Englewood became the second busiest commercial area in the city.

During the 1940s, the region's African American population began to rise. In 1950, the region was only 11 percent African American; by 1970, this proportion had grown to 96 percent. As this transition occurred, Englewood experienced increasing disinvestment and the region's prosperity significantly declined. Sears Roebuck and Company, once a hallmark of the neighborhood, shut its doors in the mid-1970s. The economy continued to decline in the 1980s with the shutdown of steel mills and other manufacturing companies, causing the area's unemployment rate to drastically increase (Vaughn and Leslie 1995). The neighborhood has yet to fully recover from the decline of the manufacturing sector despite attempts in 1999 by Clinton's New Markets Initiative and Congressman Bobby Rush to instigate redevelopment in the neighborhood (Clinton 1999).

As a result of disinvestment in the community, Englewood has an abundance of vacant lots located on both commercial and residential blocks. For our project, we focused specifically on vacant lots in residential areas. Most blocks contain between thirty and forty land parcels, which generally consist of a combination of occupied homes, abandoned homes and vacant lots. Using a brief survey of seven random blocks in Englewood, we calculated that vacant lots comprise between 13 and 33 percent of all land parcels on any given block. The conditions on these lots vary greatly. Many are overgrown with weeds and littered with trash, abandoned cars and construction debris. Others are cleared of litter, but still full of weeds. Others are free of trash and freshly mowed. Finally, a number of lots are fenced in, freshly mowed, free of trash and nicely landscaped with flowers or vegetables. However, the number of lots being cared for on any particular block varies. In some instances, every single vacant lot on the block is tended and kept clean. In others, little to no upkeep is done on any of the block's empty land.

Most of Englewood's vacant lots on residential blocks originally held a home or some other residential structure. Residents tell us that many of the original homeowners passed away and handed down the properties to their children. These new owners generally moved out of the homes—and, many times, the area altogether—and do not bother with the property's maintenance. Residents claim that the homeowners' heirs "let the property go" for a number of reasons: they did not

want it to begin with, they think it has very little value, they do not feel it is worth the trouble, or they do not have time for the upkeep.

As a result, the buildings are abandoned and neighbors become concerned that the empty structure will encourage drug dealing or other illicit activities. Consequently, many neighbors request that the city demolish the building if it sits for too long without the owner ever taking responsibility for it. After receiving such a request, the city attaches a notice to the home for demolition, giving the owner a limited amount of time to respond, and if they never claim the property, the building is demolished. Nonetheless, although pleased with the demolition, residents complain that when the city tears down a building, it never plans for redevelopment, and many vacant lots remain empty for indefinite lengths of time. Residents showed us a number of lots that have been vacant for extended periods, sometimes for over forty years.

The vacant lots are owned and controlled by four major entities: property owners, absentee owners, the city of Chicago and tax-default realty companies. Property owners do not live on the lot but maintain it until the land is developed. Absentee owners officially own the lot once a building has been demolished, but they generally put forth little to no effort in maintaining the lot. Many times the city investigates these lots for tax default. If the owner cannot be located or refuses to pay the back taxes, the city takes control of the lot. According to Malcolm Whiteside, head of the Chicago Bureau of Forestry (a subdivision of the Streets and Sanitation Department), the city installs gray posts around the perimeter of their lots to prevent illegal dumping (usually by construction companies) or the parking of abandoned cars. Additionally, the city is required to mow the grass, put down woodchips to help prevent weeds, and remove hazardous or dead trees from the lots. However, this is all dependent on citizen requests. If residents do not contact the city by calling 311 to request lot maintenance, the space will most likely remain in disarray.

Mr. Whiteside stressed the need for a cooperative relationship between the bureau and local residents. He said that the bureau does not have the resources to survey and care for every block in every neighborhood, and it depends fully on the participation of local citizens to let

them know when problems arise. Yet, many of Englewood's residents seem unaware that they are expected to contact the city for lot care. They point to neighboring vacant lots and complain that the city never comes out to maintain them. Some even claim that the city is required to come out at least once a month to mow the lots, but that they never do. Others mentioned that the city seems to forget what properties it owns. Such responses suggest a disconnect between the city and Englewood residents.

The city has also developed several programs through which current Englewood residents can themselves become property owners of the vacant lots. The former "Buy a Lot for a Dollar" program enabled residents to purchase nearby vacant lots as long as they made a minimum bid of one dollar for the property. This program made land affordable for the area's low-income residents. The city has also used "eminent domain" (a legal tactic through which the city acquires private property if there is sufficient justification for its governmental use) to grant residents free lots. Ms. Barsley, a longtime, prominent resident of the community, was one of the fortunate individuals who managed to acquire free land. She told us that the city contacted her and informed her that they were giving her full ownership of the property adjacent to her home because she had been taking care of it for many years.

Residents are currently able to acquire vacant lots through the Adjacent Neighbors Land Acquisition Program (ANLAP). Prospective buyers must live directly next door to a vacant lot to be eligible. The lot must be worth \$20,000 or less, and, in addition to a minimum bid of \$700, the potential owners must provide project plans to the city to ensure that the land will be used in a positive way. We spoke with several residents who acquired vacant lots through this program. Although the purchasing process is a lengthy ordeal, these residents were happy to have full ownership of their adjacent lot.

Without ANLAP, potential buyers must pay fair market value for property in the neighborhood. Residents we interviewed had made inquiries to the city about vacant lot rates, and the prices ranged from about \$8,000 to \$400,000. Yet, even at \$8,000, the vacant lots are unaffordable for most Englewood residents. Purchasing vacant land communally is even more difficult. Because

there is a division of responsibility when an organization like a block club purchases the property, liability becomes a bigger issue. Thus, this form of acquisition becomes virtually impossible.

Finally, several vacant lots in Englewood are owned by realty companies specializing in tax-default properties. These companies purchase properties that the city has taken over because the owners never paid their property taxes. By paying the back taxes on the property and con-



*photograph of vacant lot by Yariella Coello and Kelly Thomas*

tinuing to pay the ongoing property taxes, these companies assume ownership of the unclaimed property. Once the land has been acquired, they post advertisements on their property with slogans such as "Tax Property Sales" or "cheap property," and a phone number for interested individuals to contact. These lots vary in terms of their upkeep. Some are well maintained but others are in complete disarray.

To fully grasp the significance of vacant lots in

Englewood and community activity in relation to them, we must put these issues in the context of the neighborhood's recent development. As one of IEI's Board members described, Englewood is in the "throes of rebirth." Alderman Shirley Coleman said that there has been an influx of financial resources, which has put a spotlight on Englewood and its many vacant lots. She is pleased to see the community's vacant lots, which used to be considered liabilities in Englewood, now being seen as assets. This rebirth can arguably be linked to Mayor Daley's 1999 \$256 million revitalization plan for Englewood, which included relocating Kennedy-King College to the area around 63rd and Halsted streets; constructing commercial facilities, residential housing and a new police station; creating more parks; and improving infrastructure (Polk and Dumke 1999). The response from local residents to the relocation of Kennedy-King College is, for the most part, positive. Karen thinks it means more opportunities for area residents because they can take classes at the school's facilities. Christine, an employee for a local non-profit organization, mentioned that having a higher education institution nearby will encourage more youths to pursue further schooling because it is more accessible. A few others mentioned that the new location would prove convenient for those without access to a car.

Relocating the campus is also expected to attract additional commercial development in the area around 63rd and Halsted streets. With the mayor's revitalization plan, developers are beginning to recognize that "there is money to be made in the inner city." One resident mentioned that people are understandably excited about the development, given that for thirty years not one building was constructed in Englewood. Ms. Grace, an employee at Englewood's Board of Health, described the development as a sign that the neighborhood is "coming back." Another resident summed the issue up nicely, stating that the redevelopment helps create a sense of newness and vision for the community that will prove positive for the morale of the neighborhood.

Nonetheless, not everyone is happy with what appears to be rapid changes in the community. Dana stated that "things seem to be popping up overnight," and some residents are concerned. Many fear that the neighborhood will be gentrified, and that those who currently live in the community will be pushed out as wealthier indi-

viduals move in. One resident mentioned that property values are on the rise, and that property taxes have increased about 80 percent. She fears that both will continue to rise until those who currently live in Englewood will no longer be able afford to their homes on their minimal incomes. Alderman Coleman herself mentioned that land once worth \$300 is now worth \$3000. Consequently, she has put three hundred vacant lots on aldermanic hold, forcing any potential buyers for those plots of land to get her approval beforehand. She hopes this will allow more local residents to keep the property in their control, while also decreasing the possibility of gentrification. In addition, a number of non-profit organizations in the community are working to provide affordable homes. Under their Housing Initiative program, Rebirth of Englewood, a community development corporation, plans to build five hundred and fifty new, affordable homes. New Pisgah Church, St. Bernard Church and Catholic Charities plan to provide housing as well.

Kevin is another resident who fears that the neighborhood is about to be gentrified. He mentioned that a lot of people and/or companies are buying property and sitting on it until the right time rolls around for them to sell at a higher price. He made reference to several realtors who have purchased vacant land in Englewood on tax default yet have made little effort to sell or develop the land because they want the property to accrue value first. Current residents might not have the money to purchase the property, even at the current lower rates, but as soon as wealthier individuals take notice of the redevelopment, they will come in and sweep it up, regardless of the rising prices. He said that it is just a matter of "economics. And economical discrimination is not illegal." He referred to the gentrification happening in West Garfield Park and said he hopes the same does not happen in Englewood.

Although plenty of individuals are excited to see changes in the community, a few are wary that the redevelopment will have negative consequences. As a result, there seems to be a sense of urgency about these lots as local residents struggle to maintain ownership of properties that have not yet been slated for anything specific by the city or other for-profit organizations. As this report argues, vacant lots in Englewood can and are being used as a tool to strengthen the community and maintain control of what happens in the neighborhood.



## Environmental Concerns

In addition to the context of recent development in Englewood, it is important to discuss the environmental issues facing the community. When asked specifically about environmental problems in the neighborhood, many residents do not respond the way one might expect with problems such as air and water pollution. Instead, Englewood residents seem to view “environment” in a broader sense, including what some may label “social” problems. For example, when asked to describe any environmental concerns in Englewood, one informant listed issues such as homeowners not taking care of their property, low school attendance rates, lack of revenue-generating retail business, drug problems, and families run by young single mothers. Other residents reiterated such issues that negatively affect the neighborhood and carry as much or more weight than typical “environmental” problems.

That being said, environmental awareness is growing as the community becomes more concerned with a number of issues, which are being incorporated into community development plans. This growing environmental awareness is largely due to the recent discovery that at least a few lots in Englewood are contaminated with lead. IEI, in conjunction with the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, was in the beginning stages of a new project to develop a community garden on a lot near Nicholson School at 60th and Peoria streets. This garden was supposed to be tended primarily by the students of the school and would have served as an outdoor classroom. Three lots were tested for lead in May 2003, and each registered levels of lead that pose a threat to children according to the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency.

Lead contamination is attributed mostly to chipping paint, which, before 1978, contained lead. Because most of Englewood’s housing stock was built before this time, we can assume that a significant portion of the homes in Englewood still contain lead paint. After this discovery, IEI launched a neighborhood awareness campaign. Jean Carter-Hill of IEI, along with other respondents, said that this discovery could help explain the high levels of asthma, learning disabilities and other health issues facing Englewood children. Alderman Coleman suggested that in the past people might not have been interested in envi-

ronmental issues because it had yet to affect their lives. Now that residents are able to link their health problems to a possible environmental cause, more people may become involved.

Even in the short time since the lots were tested for lead, the community has started talking about the issue. One woman told us her daughter was poisoned with lead as a child, and that she had to go through those “horrible shots.” An issue often raised by residents is where and how to have their children tested. At a meeting regarding lead contamination, residents were told that many local clinics offer monthly lead testing free of charge. Yet, testing soil for lead is a completely different issue. IEI is particularly concerned with alerting residents who grow vegetables in their yards to the possible threat of lead contamination. Testing soil for lead is considerably more costly and difficult than testing individuals. Currently, IEI is seeking out resources to test soil in community and individual gardens.

Englewood residents are very concerned for the quality and safety of their environment in all its aspects. Several residents brought up issues pertaining specifically to vacant lots. One of the most frequently mentioned problems is the dumping of trash on these empty spaces. In addition to being filled with litter dropped by people day-to-day, many lots are plagued by “fly dumping” (illegal dumping of debris by construction companies). Alderman Coleman said that a demolition company was recently caught dumping on a vacant lot because a resident reported it to the city. She said the company was “fined big-time,” and informed us that we would be surprised at the number of violations the ward writes every month for misuse of lots. Even when lots are free of fly dumping, many are blighted by abandoned cars, which, in combination with other litter, attract rats. At a community gardening event in Englewood this summer, volunteers erecting a greenhouse encountered a septic tank and an oil tank left over from a demolished building that used to stand on the now vacant lots. One man involved in the project said that these kinds of issues frequently arise in urban agriculture projects. In the past, environmental dumping laws were not as strict or did not exist, which explains much of the pollution that now contaminates the area.

Chemical hazards were another oft-cited concern.

One person complained about her neighbor who tinkers with cars in a vacant lot on her block. The fumes from the paint and other chemicals he uses irritate the people who live next door, both of whom suffer from asthma. This is not an insignificant concern, considering that African Americans in Chicago have the highest rates of death from asthma in the country (WBEZ Radio 1999). Within Chicago itself, 85 percent of all asthma-related hospitalizations between 1999 and 2001 occurred in predominantly African American neighborhoods, including Englewood (Dobbs et al. 2004). Auto body shops are said to dump oil and other dangerous chemicals onto their property, which then seep into the sewers and soil. In some cases, the city is blamed for many of these environmental issues. Before it was abandoned, the CTA facility at 69th Street used to dump chemicals on-site and now the soil is too polluted to build there. One resident expressed concern that because the city dumps contaminated snow on vacant lots to clear the streets, the toxins could easily seep into the soil. As part of the community's ongoing awareness campaign, residents were encouraged to refrain from using salt or pesticides on their lawns.

## Deterrents to Community Involvement

Race and class issues can influence people's perceptions of their surroundings, and subsequently community dynamics are often more complex than they may first appear. When asked about specific activities that occur on vacant lots, residents usually responded in one of two ways: either no activity occurs on the lots or there is negative activity such as drug dealing, abandonment of cars, drinking, dumping trash and gang activity. Almost everyone we spoke with mentioned that the community has too many vacant lots, and a number of people referred to them as "eyesores in the neighborhood." Residents complained that the lots fill up with trash, abandoned cars and even rats because the lots are poorly maintained and only a few owners bother with their upkeep. People would prefer to see "just about anything" developed on the properties if it meant no longer having them sit stagnantly. Parks, Laundromats and other businesses were offered as specific ideas for development on vacant lots. Several individuals mentioned that they would like to see a community garden on every single block. Many residents indicated

that a dirty vacant lot sends a message that no one in the community cares.

Occasionally, residents also mentioned more positive activities occurring on the neighborhood's vacant lots such as children playing, car washing (by gangs or groups of older men) and napping. Dana pointed to a lot that was frequently used by the "yang-yangs" to wash cars, as well as a lot purchased by a block club for the creation of a communal parking lot. Barbara, who runs the food and clothing distribution center, remembered that she herself used a lot adjacent to the center to throw a neighborhood party for the kids.

We asked residents why they believe more people are not involved in maintaining vacant property, either by cleaning up trash, mowing the grass, or planting gardens. By far, residents emphasized "laziness." This was most often voiced by longtime, elderly residents who maintain vegetable gardens and distribute most of their crops to neighbors in the summer and fall. Ms. Barsley, who is eighty years old and has been maintaining a garden next to her house for over twenty-five years, said that people do not want to help, but they want to share her vegetables. "People want something for nothing," she said. Mr. Davis, an eighty-seven year old resident who also has a garden in his backyard, said that people stop by all summer checking to see whether their favorite vegetable has ripened. "I eat the least of anyone!" he exclaimed. Repeatedly, residents said that people have time to help, but they are lazy, not interested in anything and solely want to reap the benefits of someone else's work.

When we asked residents to explain what might be the difference between individuals who care for the lots and those who are supposedly "lazy," many made reference to a divide between homeowners and "transients" in the community. Although many informants acknowledged that plenty of homeowners do not care for their properties, most agreed that residents who rent their homes are the least invested in their community. The alderman reiterated this claim with the theory that blocks with an abundance of renters are significantly less active than blocks with a majority of homeowners.

Some residents suggested that many "transients" have recently been displaced from CHA housing projects. An IEI board member estimated that the proportion of owned property in Englewood has dropped from about

50 to 25 percent in the past few decades. Moreover, the number of buildings allotted for Section 8 (rent assistance) vouchers is expected to increase. Residents stated that those who have been displaced and transferred into the community view Englewood as simply “a place to live,” and have not learned the value of space. It is important to note that these perceptions of “transient” people are not unique to Englewood. The issue of how these perceptions arise is complicated by shifting dynamics of race and class relations.

This complexity was reinforced when we spoke with both renters and owners of property in Englewood. We found that the above explanations (people are lazy and/or do not understand the value of property) were not sufficient descriptions of what was actually taking place. James, a middle-aged man who maintains a garden on a vacant lot across the alley from his house, said several times that he keeps to himself and could offer no suggestions in terms of getting other people involved. We received a similar response from other residents who care for vacant lots by themselves. One woman who had moved to Englewood about nine months ago with a Section 8 voucher told us that she had not lived long enough in the neighborhood to get involved with her block club. Yet, she also mentioned that she was hesitant to participate. “Honestly, I don’t want people in my business like that. It is terrible to say, but I would rather keep to myself,” she explained. She assured us she had nothing to hide, but just did not want her neighbors scrutinizing her and her family. Our research thus indicates that there is a disconnect between renters and owners in Englewood. The longtime homeowners tend to avoid renters because they suspect laziness and disrespect, whereas the renters are afraid the homeowners will be too overbearing and nosy.

Another factor that might decrease vacant lot care is the older residents’ perceptions that children and teens are not capable of working responsibly in the gardens. Ms. Barsley admitted to thinking that a large number of kids might prove more harmful than helpful. She said that if two or three kids stopped by, eventually more would arrive, ultimately getting in the way of the work and possibly trampling over the crops. She would prefer working with adults because they seem to know what they are doing. Dana stated that kids trample nicely kept lawns

because they “don’t know anything about plants.” When we were working in Mr. Beard’s garden, several teenage boys came by to help. An elderly woman next door yelled down from her back porch, asking the boys what they were doing in the garden. We told her that they were there to help us out, and her tone of voice indicated surprise, implying that she had expected otherwise. From these responses, it seems that the children and teenagers in Englewood are constantly confronted with stereotypes, and, thus, feel unwelcome in gardening activities.

While laziness and irresponsibility was the overwhelming response from residents as to why people are not active in restoring vacant lots, we found other patterns from block to block. Almost all the residents we talked to mentioned that their formerly thriving block club had “fallen apart.” In the past, people appreciated the block clubs because residents helped one another and neighbors had someone to call if something happened on the block. Yet, there were always one or two people who were most active, and they generally kept the clubs alive. In recent years, those individuals have either moved out or passed away, leaving the club without strong leadership.

Mentioned less frequently, and more directly related to community gardening projects, are a few technical factors that also deter community involvement. Maggie, from the Boulevard Arts Center, said that the biggest problem in community gardening is maintaining the space. Many times people will work at the onset of a garden project, but when a consistent group of gardeners fails to form and funds dry up, the project begins to fall apart<sup>1</sup>. She said it’s a “tough job.” Dana reiterated this point at her garden club meeting when she mentioned that gardening “is an everyday thing.” She pointed to a University of Illinois Cooperative vacant lot project that had failed to take off after the first few weeks. She also admitted that she gave up on a vacant lot garden because it got to be “too much.” This issue is magnified by time restrictions since activities must be organized around growing and harvesting seasons.

In other instances, gardens or lawns have been destroyed before they even had the chance to fall into disarray. IEI’s previous community garden was abandoned after it was “trashed.” One woman complained that ever since she has fixed up the lot next door, her neighbors are always hanging out, playing basketball,

and otherwise making a mess of the area. At the alderman's meeting, a man announced that his wife's flower planters had been stolen off their porch several times. While walking around the neighborhood, we noticed several planters and benches chained to front porches. Many residents seem hesitant to invest time, physical effort, and, often, significant sums of money in a project that will be ruined by vandals.

As word has spread through the community of the possible threat of lead contamination in the soil, many residents have expressed concern for eating the vegetables they grow or receive from other local gardeners. At the community lead-awareness meeting hosted by IEI, representatives from the city assured residents that after thoroughly washing vegetables, the threat of ingesting dangerous levels of lead is slim. IEI put its community garden project on hold when they discovered the high amounts of lead on the proposed garden site. When they resume plans for the project, they must take extra precautions, such as making sure all volunteers (especially children) wear gloves and ensuring that vegetables are grown in raised beds with imported soil. Yet, as of this writing, we have not encountered any residents who have stopped eating locally grown vegetables because of the threat of lead poisoning. Nonetheless, fear of contamination might hold residents back from starting new projects in vacant lots.

## Vacant Lots as Community Assets

When IEI unveiled its plans to transform a vacant lot into a garden at a community meeting, residents in attendance were ecstatic. The proposed garden would be installed directly east of Nicholson Elementary School and would function as an outdoor classroom, a green space for recreation and relaxation, and a symbol of the community's investment. One woman said, "I'm glad you're taking that ugly spot and doing something beautiful." Residents are aware that the physical condition of their neighborhood creates an image that both insiders and outsiders use (whether consciously or unconsciously) to develop opinions about their community. Through activities we observed on vacant lots and conversations with residents, we found that, despite the negative image of vacant lots, many residents are using this land as an asset

in the community.

While many informants insisted that vacant lots are places for only negative, if any, activity, we noticed that vacant lots were in fact being used for a variety of positive purposes such as play, socialization and business. Many lots are used as shortcuts as evidenced by the worn diagonal paths cutting through them. A number of lots close to the 63rd Street redevelopment were being used as temporary storage space for construction materials. We observed children throughout Englewood using vacant lots to play organized sports such as football, baseball and basketball, as well as less structured games. One afternoon, we passed by a young girl chauffeuring her brother around in an imaginary limo (a wagon) in a lot close to her home. Another day we saw two young kids playing near the dumpsters in a garbage-filled lot. The Agapé Church on Ashland Avenue and 60th Street used two vacant lots for their summer block party where they set up basketball hoops for a free throw contest.

Older residents use the lots as space to gather and socialize. A few groups of men appeared to be "regulars" on specific vacant lots. Many even set up a table and chairs or a stack of milk crates for their lounge area. These groups of friends would frequently play cards or tell jokes in their space. One afternoon, we passed an older gentleman who was in the middle of telling a dramatic story to his friends seated in nearby chairs. Another group of men threw a barbeque in a lot near the West Englewood library.

The vacant lots also provide a place for informal economy vendors to set up their stands and sell their goods. They sell hot dogs, sno-cones, and a variety of other merchandise. A hot dog vendor has operated three mobile stands on sidewalks in the neighborhood for a year and said, "I'm not gonna lie; I do pretty well." He hopes to expand the business into a permanent structure along 63rd Street, but currently cannot afford to purchase a vacant lot. For now, he is content to set up shop on the corner. A middle-aged woman sells sno-cones and hand-made jewelry on a vacant lot on a busy street. She mentioned that in the two summers she has set up her stand on the vacant property, she has never had any problems from the city. She said this is largely due to her positive relationship with the alderman. Another longtime resident has sold purses, t-shirts, hair accessories, and other



similar items from a stand on 63rd Street for the past fifteen years. He says he has a peddler's license but does not plan to purchase the lot where he works. Like the woman selling jewelry, he says he is "in good with the alderman," so he can work on the property without paying rent or providing proof that he owns it. Comments about building a positive relationship with the aldermen were echoed by other residents, one of whom warned, "if the alderman isn't on your side, the project won't happen."

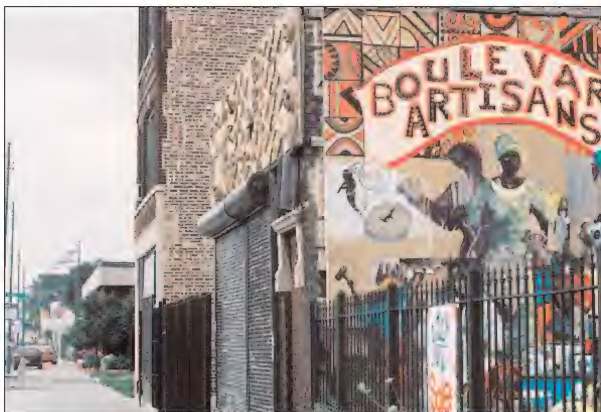
Of all the activities we observed happening on vacant lots, most relevant to our project was the maintenance of unclaimed property, whether through consistent mowing, simple landscaping or a flower, vegetable, or sculpture garden. These lots are not necessarily being utilized for specific activities such as a business or community group, but they are nonetheless being used in positive ways.

The care of lots varies in frequency and quality. Some residents simply mow nearby lots to keep them looking fresh and clean. Others mow and do some additional gardening, which might include covering a portion of the lawn in mulch, planting a few shrubs, and adding rocks for decoration. Still others might create more elaborate flower gardens with a wide variety of plants, flowers and shrubs. The most committed residents might even start a garden with a vast array of vegetables and fruits.

The care of lots also varies in terms of whether or not it is done at the individual or communal level. Mr. James keeps up his garden, located on 60th and Racine streets, all on his own. He has planted a number of vegetables including cabbage, collard greens and tomatoes. He fenced the garden in, added several pieces of lawn furniture, and put up a sign that reads "Children's Lot." When asked why he decided to start the garden, he said he thought it would be a fun way to keep him busy and would provide a good place for the local kids to spend their time. He also plans an annual block party in the lot. We spoke to a few other residents, who, like Mr. James, decided to care for nearby vacant lots on their own initiative and continue to do so by themselves.

On the other hand, both Mr. Beard's and Ms. Barsley's gardens are more communal ventures. Mr.

Beard's flower garden is supposed to be maintained by the entire block. He mentioned that although he was the one to initiate the project, a number of residents came to help get it started. He leaves the garden's gates unlocked so anyone in the community can walk in to either work on the garden or relax on its bench. Likewise, Ms. Barsley keeps the side gate to her garden at 65th and Morgan



photograph of Boulevard Arts Center by Yariella Coello and Kelly Thomas

streets open for anyone in the community who wants to stop by and help out. Inside the gates, one passes an intricate white archway and steps onto dirt packed with fruits and vegetables. The garden blooms with strawberries, tomatoes, eggplants, beans and grape tomatoes. PEACE, a local children's organization, occasionally volunteers in Mrs. Barsley's garden, and this past summer, PAX TV brought fashion models to help at the site.

The Boulevard Arts Center, another non-profit organization, also cares for vacant lots in a communal fashion. Rather than planting flowers or vegetables, however, they create decorative sculpture gardens. Using artwork that local youth make at the center, the Boulevard Arts Center has installed sculptures in three lots close to their facilities on Justine Street. People passing by the sculpture garden are bombarded with bright colors and creative shapes that help to beautify the community, but the space serves a greater purpose as well. The Boulevard Arts Center's "Outdoor Kids" program targets children in the neighborhood who are at-risk for gang involvement (most of the time, this means their siblings are active gang members). For these children, space is invisibly, but pow-

erfully, marked by gang territory, and the areas where these youth are permitted to spend time is sometimes severely restricted. Entering the center often means crossing an unspoken boundary, resulting in occasional problems with other kids at the center. Therefore, staff at the center has developed outdoor activities for these at-risk youth, such as bongo drum lessons, rap lyric-writing sessions or simply cleaning the surrounding lots of trash. Maggie, director at the Boulevard Arts Center, told us that these boys are “at their best” outdoors. During our interview, one of the outdoor kids, Damian, stopped by the center three times, looking for something to do. In this case, vacant lots, specifically the Center’s sculpture gardens, provide a safe haven for children whose access to public space is severely limited. The opportunity to work on a vacant lot provides a constructive alternative for at-risk youth to becoming involved in illicit activities.

Whether individual or communal, vacant lot care proves highly beneficial to the community. On the surface, these lots provide physical beauty in Englewood. The area becomes more aesthetically pleasing to both locals and visitors. Residents we interviewed frequently complimented well-kept gardens and those who create and maintain them. In addition to bringing beauty to the neighborhood, vacant lot care provides residents with something positive to keep them busy. For seniors, most of whom have already retired, vacant lot care provides them with stimulating activity. Most seniors seem well aware of this fact, as it is mostly the older folks of the Englewood community who are currently caring for the vacant lots. Everyone we interviewed who had started an individual or communal garden on a vacant lot was at least fifty years of age. Nonetheless, vacant lot care also provides positive activity for youth. In the two days we spent helping Mr. Beard out in his garden, a number of youth came in and helped us cover the garden in mulch with no expectations of a monetary reward. Echoing the Boulevard Art Center’s guiding principles, these youth claimed that they had nothing better to do and figured they might as well keep themselves busy with something useful.

Another benefit of vacant lots gardens is promoting healthy lifestyles in the community. Jewel, a major grocery chain, was shut down in the 1990s. The only grocery store currently in the neighborhood, Aldi’s, does not provide

fresh meat or produce, which necessitates extra trips and longer commutes for groceries. Residents with their own vegetable gardens fill this need for fresh produce for themselves and their neighbors. Mr. Beard told us that he always gives extra food to his children when they stop by to visit, and he offered us green tomatoes and beans. Mr. Jeffery, another longtime resident with a vegetable garden, said that he gives his vegetables out to the kids on his block. Ms. Allison, the director of the children’s PEACE organization, suggested that vegetable gardens could prove very lucrative if residents decided to sell their produce to people both inside and outside of the community. Eating locally grown produce increases awareness of where our food comes from and ensures that the produce is properly handled.

By keeping up their physical space, residents say they create the impression of a community that cares for itself and its members. Well-kept vacant lots represent a group of individuals who appreciate themselves, others



*photograph of lot garden peppers by Hannah Anderson*

and their surroundings. As one informant explained, “to beautify one’s yard is to beautify one’s community.” Residents frequently cited the importance of developing

a sense of ownership in community improvement projects. This issue was discussed in detail when IEI unveiled its community garden plans. Board members and other residents in attendance mentioned holding a garden-naming contest and having young local artists paint a mural on a section of the garden's fence. Most important for IEI's new project, as voiced by project manager Jean Carter-Hill, is for "the kids to feel like they have ownership of the garden." Carter-Hill was planning to gather kids who live on the blocks closest to the garden to help at the onset of the project in order to encourage this sense of ownership. Residents who lived near the site said they would be interested in volunteering in the garden and suspected that their neighbors would also get involved because it is so close to their homes. This mirrors what we have heard and seen from other residents. It seems that residents are most invested and involved in the property on their immediate block.

Often, residents are inspired by the opportunity to work with others. Dana gained inspiration from the women who attended her garden club meeting to keep working on establishing a club, and she hoped that the efforts and enthusiasm of the garden club's members would inspire others to take better care of the neighborhood. She envisioned the garden club as a "sharing and fun thing." Additionally, these projects are wonderful opportunities to pool resources and collaborate with others. As Dana pointed out, neighborhood garden clubs with ten or more members are eligible to receive funding and supplies from the city, as well as seeds and other supplies from gardening companies. Jean Carter-Hill was very excited about the collaboration between groups at the Peace Organization's greenhouse project, and felt inspired by the connections she made with larger organizations such as Growing Power and Heifer International (both of which are non-profits dealing with urban agriculture).

Public recognition of the inspiring people who care for vacant lots—and therefore, for the community—offers encouragement for them to continue their efforts. Mr. Beard told us he had taken pictures of his tomato garden last year and sent them to the city's Urbs in Horto gardening contest. He beamed as he showed us his third prize plaque from the city, which is now displayed on his living room wall. Other residents have suggested hosting a

neighborhood-wide gardening contest and awarding winners with plaques to display in their gardens.

While working in Mr. Beard's garden, we experienced firsthand the motivation of working with others. Soon after we started working in the corner garden, two women passing by stopped in to help. One of these women mentioned that collaborating with others makes work a lot more fun. The next day, three boys stopped by to help us. As the day progressed, several of their friends showed up as well and asked if they could help out too. As more boys showed up, labor was divided and the workload lessened, causing everyone to have more fun. At the end of the day, Michael, a senior at Englewood High School, asked about similar projects that he might get involved in because he had had such a wonderful time.

Tangible incentives were also mentioned as a way to create motivation, especially by children and teens. One woman mentioned that she is paid by her block club to mow all the lots and parkways on the block. In the instance of Mr. Beard's garden, the boys who initially volunteered had been promised fifteen dollars each for helping. As we worked together and talked about the project, they said that while money was indeed a motivating factor, they would still be interested in participating if food, drinks, or good music were provided. Mr. Beard was obviously aware of these motivators because while we were working in his garden, he brought out a cooler filled with ice, soda and water for the volunteers who all appreciated the refreshments.

Finally, when talking with residents about why they become involved in community projects, many cite personal values or interest. Jean Carter-Hill pointed to her parents and upbringing as the driving force behind her desire to help the community. Barbara, who runs Feed, Clothe and Help the Needy, explained her traumatic childhood, during which she often went hungry. She said that at a very young age she "vowed that [she] didn't want anyone to go hungry, especially children, because [she] knows what hunger pains feel like." Johanna, one of the women who helped us out in Mr. Beard's garden, said she was raised to help out older people. She is especially concerned for older men who are at a higher risk for having a stroke. She cannot walk by a senior citizen working in his or her lawn without asking if they need a helping hand. She said she wants people to do the same for her when she

gets older. Some residents said their desire to spend time outdoors motivates them to work on a lot while others cited a passion for horticulture. Dana calls her garden a “test garden,” where she attempts to grow plants that are not expected to grow in Illinois. She said, “I love to watch things grow.”

## Recommendations: Collaborating, Communicating, and Connecting

Our recommendations for IEi were based on the activities we observed on the vacant lots as well as what our ethnographic research revealed about residents’ visions for their community. We organized our suggestions into the categories that form the cornerstone of IEi’s mission: collaboration, communication and connection. Many of the suggestions were specific to community gardening, especially in relation to IEi’s community garden project at the Nicholson School<sup>li</sup>. However, these recommendations can be applied to almost any community involvement campaign.

**Collaboration** is an invaluable opportunity to share resources and work together toward collective accomplishments. When we met with IEi board members, the idea for an annual, community wide Farmers’ Market was born. Collaborating with other organizations, block clubs, street vendors and community gardeners could make this idea a reality. As we envision it, the Nicholson School garden, in its accessible, publicly visible position, would be the site of the market. Visitors would enjoy the flowers, other plants and sculptures in the garden and possibly be inspired to initiate a similar project closer to home. Other art pieces created by neighborhood youth would be brought to the market for display and sale. Participants of the Boulevard Arts Center’s bongo drum sessions, or any other musically inclined individuals from the community, would perform for the event. Peace Organization volunteers would distribute information on community gardening and environmental issues. Block club members and other residents who are currently working on small gardens would bring their vegetables, flowers, seeds and other goods for sale or free distribution. Vendors would pull together and access more members in the community, improving their business while providing refreshments and souvenirs to the market’s visitors. Overall, an annual

or semi-annual Farmer’s Market would be a celebration of the community’s strong bonds and commitment to making Englewood an even better place to live.

**Communication** is the first step towards developing community awareness and initiating action. We suggest that IEi increase community awareness on any issue primarily through word-of-mouth and door-to-door techniques, which create a personal connection between residents and have proven effective in inspiring action. Through these techniques, IEi could encourage residents to take part in local or citywide gardening contests and alert residents of precautions to take against lead poisoning. In addition, we support the use of signs and other visible clues that stress the communal aspect of community gardens and welcome all residents to enjoy these spaces.

Specifically regarding the issue of lead contamination, we suggest investigating the possibilities of phytoremediation. Phytoremediation involves using certain plants that will naturally absorb toxic chemicals and minerals, such as lead, from the soil. We suggest earmarking a few of the raised bed plots in IEi’s garden for phytoremediative plants, such as sunflowers or cabbage. In addition to possibly reducing lead levels, these beds can be used as an educational tool for teachers and other community educators.

**Connection** is the means by which groups who are already great assets to the community are brought together to accomplish even greater goals in the neighborhood. We suggest that IEi connect seniors with children and teens. These two groups have the most free time, especially in the summer, since neither group is in school or working full-time. The seniors can teach the youth in hands-on situations. For example, a senior resident could show youth the basics of gardening and horticulture while actually working with them in a real garden. In these situations, the young people would learn and help the community while the seniors receive much needed help with their manual labor and stay active and connected to other community members. This will encourage a sense of unity among community members and create collective ownership of the garden. In striking a balance wherein everyone involved is learning and teaching, each individual, as well as the community as a whole, will reap the benefits.

Furthermore, we suggest IEi work as a catalyst in revitalizing block clubs. IEi leaders could seek out a charis-



matic resident on each block, who would in turn visit neighbors and build interest. As mentioned before, IEi could then act as a model for each block's community garden and other events. A block-wide vegetable and plant exchange once or twice a summer, possibly coinciding with the back-to-school block parties, would get everyone on the block outside, communicating, and sharing.

## Conclusion

In this project, we have found that Englewood has a multitude of strengths and assets that IEi, as well as other local organizations, can work with to develop a stronger community. Through our asset-based, participatory action research approach, we were able to work directly with Englewood residents to discover what matters to them, and then use the information to determine the neighborhood's assets and opportunities for improvement. By conceptualizing vacant lots as assets instead of liabilities to the community, residents are initiating change and community improvement on their own terms with their own resources. Whether by growing vegetables, mowing lawns, playing baseball or selling sno-cones, residents are making the most of the resources available to them in the face of numerous obstacles. Building on the neighborhood's many assets, Englewood residents are hopeful that their community will again return to the thriving area it once was. One resident envisioned Englewood as a "phoenix rising on the horizon." Literally, from the ground up, Englewood's residents are investing themselves in efforts to strengthen an already impressively vibrant community.

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i At the time this publication was being produced, Jean Carter-Hill informed URCTI that the Boulevard Arts Center had been forced to close due to lack of funding. This unfortunate loss to the Englewood area is illustrative of the constant flux that this community faces and the challenges of maintaining viable outreach programs in the neighborhood.

ii While this article was in production, the new garden at Nicholson Elementary School was named after Imagine Englewood...if! Jean Carter-Hill.

# Building on the Past: A New Foundation for Community in North Kenwood-Oakland

Cara Spicer and Gustavo Rivera

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## Introduction

In the first half of the 20th century, the federal government responded to the need for public housing by initiating the construction of large-scale high-rise buildings in numerous American cities. In the 1970s, the problems associated with the concentration of low-income populations in buildings suffering from years of neglect resulted in a change in housing assistance for lower income families. Section 8 rental assistance was initiated to offer struggling families affordable housing in the location of their choice. The objective was to decentralize poverty and reduce the problems associated with the large-scale high-rise developments. The trend to develop mixed-income housing resulted in the demolition of many of the former developments and led to new partnerships between government agencies and the private sector.

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In Chicago, this trend manifested itself in the Chicago Housing Authority's Plan for Transformation, a commitment to change the CHA's entire housing inventory. In the Oakland neighborhood, this resulted in the demolition of several units of the Lake Park Homes in 1999. The firm of Draper and Kramer was selected to build Lake Park Crescent, a mixed-income development that served as our contact in the neighborhood. Lake Park Crescent, which welcomed its first new tenants in

October 2004, is one of several mixed-income developments under construction in the neighborhood. The goal of our research, which was conducted as part of the Urban Research and Curriculum Transformation Institute (URCTI) in the Center for Cultural Understanding and Change at The Field Museum, was to identify neighborhood assets that would help define and support community-building strategies in this increasingly economically diverse neighborhood. As a result of the research described below, several community leaders including Milton Mizenburg and his wife Gloria-Bean, representatives from Little Black Pearl, activist Shirley Newsome and Alderman Preckwinkle attended a welcoming ceremony for the new tenants, assisting their integration into the neighborhood.

## Neighborhood Background

The North Kenwood-Oakland neighborhood<sup>i</sup> is currently undergoing change at a furious pace. Its latest incarnation owes much to the qualities that made it so attractive to affluent settlers in the late 19th century. Economic and social changes resulted in the migration of the wealthy to more northern communities of Chicago, and the area became home to middle class and working families. By the 1940s and 1950s, the area had become the center of commercial life on the South Side for African Americans. In 1948, the Supreme Court outlawed restrictive covenants in housing.

As a result, more neighborhoods became open to middle class African Americans and many chose to leave the neighborhood. Subsequent abandonment by the pri-

vate and public sectors accelerated toward the end of the 1960s and 1970s, and the neighborhood was also hard-hit by the escalation of drug activities. *Gautreaux vs. Chicago Housing Authority* (1968) put the brakes on the development of public housing in predominately African American areas, ushering in a new strategy for providing low cost and affordable housing. In the 1980s, community organizations were among the first to use low-income housing tax credits to finance new construction. Ground was broken for such a project by the late Mayor Harold Washington on November 25, 1987, the morning of his death. When Richard M. Daley was elected in 1989, neighborhood development continued as a top priority. His neighborhood initiatives, as well as the other public works that have characterized his administration, stemmed the tide of urban émigrés and once again positioned the city as a great place to live.

As the demand for middle class housing increased, the search was on for potential development sites. Following decades of economic decline on the South Side, the city owned many properties due to foreclosure, tax delinquency and abandonment. Huge industrial tracks had become ghost towns, weakened by the overall decline in manufacturing. Proximity to the lakefront and downtown, major investment in infrastructure by the city, and the availability of land made many of these forgotten neighborhoods on the South Side enormously appealing. North Kenwood-Oakland, with its proximity to the lakefront and the architectural distinction of its housing stock, was ripe for renewal (Rodkin et al. 2004:76-77).

## Methods

During the course of our nine-week internship, we interviewed approximately fifty people. Our encounters took place on the street and in office buildings, businesses and residences. We interviewed home owners, renters, residents of independent living communities, members of the North Kenwood-Oakland Conservation Community Council, ex-members of block clubs, street vendors, aspiring businessmen and women, church leaders, soup kitchen volunteers, people that resided elsewhere but worked in the community, directors of non-profit organizations, the alderman and scholars. Even though we attempted to interview people from all walks of life, we

are still missing the voices of residents who are not directly involved in the political decision-making process and individuals who no longer live in the community but continue to sustain relationships with their old neighbors. Future researchers would greatly benefit from interviewing ex-residents of the Lake Park and Ida B. Wells Homes.

## Team Ethnography

Research was conducted in both professional and neighborhood settings. Cara met primarily with directors of non-profit organizations, political leaders and developers. Gustavo talked with vendors, other people on the streets and area residents. Although it was often necessary for us to work individually in order to obtain a wider picture of the community, we both agree that the most significant breakthroughs occurred while working together. The fusion of Cara's outgoing and vivacious personality with Gustavo's mellow and pensive aura, coupled with our different ages and exterior shades contributed to making a wide range of people feel comfortable. It was when we were together that people invited us into their homes, and it was in those settings that people shared their most vivid stories with us. Another technique that we used was walking around North Kenwood with a local historian. During our walk around the community, we met several of the area's residents and were even invited to come back for a more formal interview. Just the sheer act of being seen with this community resident undoubtedly influenced people's decision to talk to us.

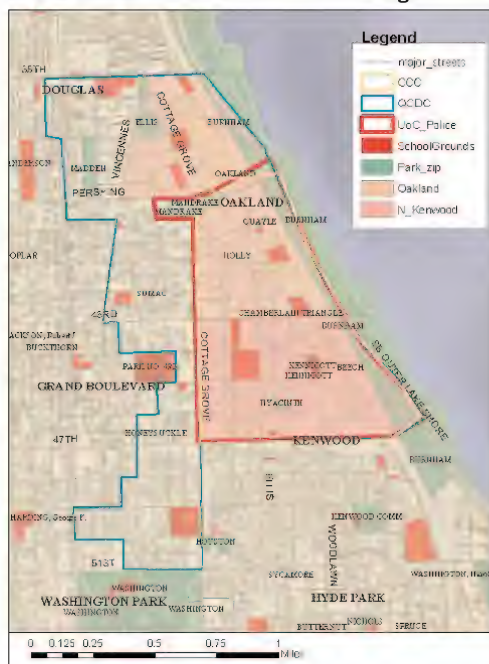
We spent three days per week in the field on average, one of which we worked together. What we found most advantageous when working together was the ability to write notes while maintaining eye contact. It became clear that having two perspectives of a conversation creates a more complete account. We employed an asset mapping approach to our research in the neighborhood, phase one of which involved locating public spaces where the community meets such as parks, play lots and parkways. We also identified centers of social services such as health clinics and employment facilities. Finally, we identified other structures such as schools and churches where residents of the community meet on a regular basis. Phase two of our asset mapping involved tracing resources not easily defined by the built environment, such as living histories and the social, cul-

tural and institutional networks that have sustained the community.

## Borders

As social scientists, we understand borders as complex processes of signification. Boundaries are not natural, true or real. They are imagined, maintained and endowed with meaning by individuals and collective bodies who invest in them. The boundaries we created for our study fall within, overlap and traverse pre-existing boundaries created by numerous institutions.

### Fluid Boundaries of the Lake Park Crescent Neighborhood



Map created at CCUC by Hannah Anderson, Cara Spicer and Gustavo Rivera. Base G/S data provided by The City of Chicago B/S Department.

At the beginning of the summer we were given the daunting task of mapping out the assets of the North Kenwood and Oakland communities. The first week we asked area residents to demarcate the borders of their corresponding neighborhoods. Most residents agreed that North Kenwood runs from 47th Street to 43rd Street with Cottage Grove being the boundary to the west and the Metra rail line forming the eastern bound-

ary. Oakland's western and eastern boundaries are the same, running from 43rd Street to 35th Street. Both descriptions correspond with the "official" boundaries set by the City of Chicago.

After the first few days in the field, we realized that we had to narrow our site to a smaller area. We decided that a feasible zone would be bounded by 47th Street to the south, Cottage Grove to the west, 39th Street to the north and the Metra rail line to the east. Not surprisingly, we found that we were not the only individuals creating boundaries around these communities. The University of Chicago Police, for example, recently extended their protection to include the North Kenwood and Oakland communities, including the region bounded from East Pershing Road on the north, South Cottage Grove Avenue to the west, East 47th Street to the south, and the Metra railroad tracks to the east. A portion of East Oakwood Boulevard extending west of South Cottage Grove Avenue is also included in their territory. Other organizations such as the Chicago Police Department, the North Kenwood-Oakland Community Conservation Council, QUAD Communities Development Corporation (QCDC), the local government (4th Ward) and the federal government (Empowerment Zones) also rework and produce different boundaries for political, public service and economic purposes. Individuals use streets, landmarks, official documents such as tax statements and local history to construct boundaries. When we asked residents what community they belonged to, their responses included the South Side, North Kenwood, Oakland and Bronzeville. These shifting boundaries reflect a fluidity of frontiers that are continually altered, manipulated and contested.

## Physical Assets

In the initial stages of our asset mapping, we attempted to locate places that the community currently uses. We began by charting the green spaces located within the boundaries of our area. In addition to one large park (Mandrake) and three medium size parks (Kennicott, Price-King Campus and Hyacinth) there are numerous play lots scattered throughout both communities. The parkway on Drexel extending from 51st Street to 39th



Street also provides an area where people can take afternoon strolls, walk their dogs, people watch, meet and visit friends, or simply enjoy a great day. On the weekends, people use the parkway to barbeque and during the week, boys use a tree and a milk crate as a basketball hoop. Nearby, a group of girls jump rope “double dutch” style. On several occasions, we heard people talking about God, the weather, family and friends. Probably more than any park, the parkway on Drexel provides a strip where the community meets and establishes relationships. Furthermore, two bridges, one on Oakwood and 39th Street and another on 43rd Street provide access to the lakefront, which contains a park that unites both communities with the entire city of Chicago. There we find miles of bike paths, beaches and green space.



*photograph of Lake Park Crescent building by Mary Doi*

In addition to green space, we identified buildings used by community members and visitors on a regular basis, such as schools, the alderman’s office, health clinics and two prominent community organizations: Little Black Pearl and Abraham Lincoln Centre. There are also numerous centers of faith-based organizations, including a mosque and several Protestant and Catholic churches (mostly concentrated in the North Kenwood community) that offer various services. For example, the Hyde Park Seventh Day Adventist Church hosts a weekly soup kitchen, occasional health services, health fairs, free haircuts and a summer camp for children in addition to church services on Saturday, Wednesday and Friday.

## People Power

If we were to take a drive around the North Kenwood and

Oakland communities, we would see a post office, fire station, health clinics, schools and parks: typical facilities in an urban American community. Communities, however, are more than a collection of facilities. They are composed of people who constantly face challenges, problems and threats. Together they resist, adapt and work for a better tomorrow. Even though most “official” changes in the community must receive the approval and financial support of the alderman’s office, not all decisions regarding the future of the community are made through formal channels. Passionate and concerned residents are actively shaping the direction of their communities.

Although North Kenwood-Oakland (NKO) has significant physical assets, the community is in many ways defined by the social, cultural and institutional networks that date from its heyday in the mid-20th century. Residents who stayed in the neighborhood used their modest resources to maintain their homes and develop small businesses. In the mid-1980s a new wave of settlers, attracted primarily by the affordability and quality of homes, added momentum to the reclamation of the neighborhood. Personal initiative in the renovation of individual properties was punctuated by a growing number of community groups dedicated to improving the neighborhood. The effort gained legislative steam with the designation of North Kenwood-Oakland as a Conservation Area (City of Chicago Department of Urban Renewal 1990) and the election of Alderman Toni Preckwinkle in 1991. We identify the following “networks” as pivotal in the social, cultural and institutional changes in the neighborhood.

## Local Government

One of the most powerful assets found in NKO is the character of local governance. Alderman Preckwinkle, now in her fourth term of office, is by many accounts one of the most accessible legislators in the city. On our first visit to the neighborhood we were introduced to “Thursday’s Out,” a practice initiated shortly after the alderman first took office in 1991. Every Thursday (except the first Thursday of the month), the alderman is available at her office from 6:30 p.m. until she has spoken with everyone. Residents simply sign up and wait their turn to speak with the alderman about whatever is on their mind. Toni’s economical style (“Who’s next!?”) and

hummingbird-like rapidity (visits and responses are typically clocked at five minutes or less) belie the warmth and total attention evident in her greeting “Hi, I’m Toni, what can I do for you?” The alderman’s staff specializes in various areas, and once Toni has determined the crux of the matter, she frequently directs her constituents to one of them. Chief of staff Al Kindle sums up the goal of these evenings: “When we hear from people we tend to solve the problems. (Smiling) We don’t want to see people over and over again on the same issues.”

Alderman Preckwinkle’s voting record<sup>ii</sup> clearly identifies her as one of the few independent cogs in Mayor Daley’s machine. The perspective of this political pragmatist who retains the ideals of the Woodstock generation can be deduced from the magazines arrayed on the coffee table in the reception area. Recent issues of *National Geographic*, *Smart Money*, *Utne* and a guide to finding sweatshops underscore the alderman’s commitment to cultural awareness, economic literacy and social justice. It is within this ideological framework that she strives to develop economic diversity in the neighborhood. Determined to be effective in the real world of Chicago politics while maintaining a commitment to democratic ideals, the alderman favors taking issues to the community, a characteristic that some politicians feel can make life a little too exciting:

**PUBLIC SERVANT:** Sometimes the alderman is too accessible (a bemused expression).

**CARA:** What do you mean?

**PS:** Alderman Preckwinkle follows a community process that can make things harder.

**C:** What do you mean?

**PS:** For example, when a TIF district is identified, community hearings are supposed to be held. Toni opens it up, follows the democratic process. It can get a little rough. But we have worked through it.

**C:** How?

**PS:** We give people the best information available to us, let them know everything we know and hope for the best.

Each time we visited the alderman’s office we met a variety of people from the community who work as volunteers. Since we rarely encountered the same individuals, we surmised that there is a significant number of individuals in this pool. Volunteers engaged in meaningful activities such as event planning and legislative projects as well

as the “envelope stuffing” kinds of chores that go with the territory. A mentoring mentality is prevalent among staffers and more experienced volunteers. Chief of staff Al Kindle was proud when he spoke about several protégés who now work as chiefs of staff in other ward offices. Felicia, a resident whose family has been in the neighborhood for decades, remembered that when she first started working at the alderman’s office she did not know “how things worked.” When her fiancé was wrongfully imprisoned, she was frustrated in her attempts to help him. With coaching, she became adept at negotiating the legal and institutional labyrinth of the Illinois Department of Corrections. Felicia will continue to make good use of her newly acquired skills as she and her fiancé plan to open as business when he is released. Clearly, Felicia’s experience as a volunteer has contributed to her growth as an individual and as a member of the community.

## Pulses of Power

The particular way in which this community is being shaped owes much to those who have devoted a large part of their personal time to civic and community involvement. As stated earlier, momentum for the current spate of activity began to gather steam when Mayor Daley designated NKO as a Conservation Area. In the following year he appointed fifteen members to the North Kenwood-Oakland Conservation Community Council to act as the *official* representatives of the North Kenwood-Oakland community and assist the city in preparing a Conservation Plan. Shirley Newsome emerged as chairperson of the organization. Although a relative newcomer to the neighborhood, Shirley immediately began to apply the skills she had acquired as a community activist in her old neighborhood. “Tired of living in fear and filth,” Shirley and her husband organized the first block club and actively campaigned for Toni Preckwinkle as alderman of the 4th Ward. When asked if she was not somewhat daunted by challenging a “machine” incumbent, Shirley confidently stated that politicians are the servants of those who elect them. “If you are organized, they must listen to you.” Alderman Preckwinkle often jokes, “Shirley has been in office longer than I have.”

Predating Shirley’s arrival on the scene, a number of individuals outside official planning processes began devoting enormous energy to research and advocacy of

the neighborhood. In 1986, Ruby Harris, an industrial design student in Hyde Park, was captivated by the beauty of the neighborhood's buildings and purchased her home on Lake Park Avenue. Appalled by the proposed demolition of the old buildings to make way for the "Kramer Plan" development, she became active in the North Kenwood Association. There she became acquainted with Mary Borderline, a lifelong resident who was engaged in an effort to create a community center out of a school that had been closed. Ruby and Mary were among many who participated vigorously in the community development process. In June of 1995, Ruby sent out a letter inviting artists in the community to a meeting at artist Milton Mizenburg's house to complete the steps needed for the creation of "The Black Heritage Arts Group," a community-based arts group with the goal of opening a visual and performing arts center. Although this particular project was never realized, it is one of our recommendations that a way be found to "make room" for these and other cultural pioneers in the current planning process.

### Building Momentum for Change

On July 11, 1988 at a meeting held in the community, Mayor Sawyer reiterated the city's commitment to a planning process for Kenwood-Oakland and stated that the process would begin immediately. Letters from the mayor were sent to approximately seventy-five persons representing community organizations, businesses, churches, schools, housing organizations, social service agencies and other community-based institutions, inviting their participation in the Neighborhood Planning Committee (NPC). Over two hundred residents, property owners, merchants and representatives of locally based organizations and institutions participated in the identification of what the community wanted to achieve. This culminated in the preparation of a land use plan draft issued in a December 1988 report. The city then convened a Community Assistance Panel (CAP). Using the framework of the land use plan and the goals and objectives prepared by the NPC, the CAP was to prepare a concept plan for the community. The CAP carried out this activity and issued its report in April 1989.

As a result of the activities of the NPC and the CAP, the city designated North Kenwood-Oakland as a

Conservation Area in 1990. As the official representatives of the community, the Conservation Community Council then assisted the city in the preparation of a Conservation Plan. This plan is focused on three topic areas: housing, economics and culture/education/recreation. Goals include the use of existing housing stock as a framework to develop new buildings that blend in with the neighborhood, the encouragement of individual local ownership of business and residential property and enhancing the environment through the development of parks, neighborhood playgrounds, recreation/cultural facilities and open space. The plan continues to guide the activities of the Conservation Community Council today.

In 1994 Valerie Jarrett, Commissioner of the Department of Planning and Development, supported the "Parade of Homes" on Oakenwald Street in North Kenwood (Rodkin et al. 2004:76-77). The city agreed to finance several new homes designed to complement the existing architectural style of the neighboring homes. The parade was a huge success and jump-started the trend for development.

In 2003 North Kenwood, Oakland, Douglas and Grand Boulevard were included collectively as one of sixteen Chicago neighborhoods in the Local Initiatives Support Corporation's (LISC) New Communities Program, which supports comprehensive community development. The five-year effort seeks to rejuvenate decaying communities, bolster those in danger of decline and preserve the diversity of gentrifying areas. Nearly everyone we have talked to has been invited to participate on the committees. For a number of reasons many of those who have worked most passionately for the community have declined to participate, though our research did not focus in depth on these interpersonal dynamics.

### Art in the Service of Dreams

The architectural legacy left by the neighborhood's first residents remains one of the most compelling physical aspects of the neighborhood. Even at the height of the neighborhood's decline, these distinctive homes proved irresistible to a number of creative urban pioneers. Undaunted by the threat of crime or gang activity and the hard work it would take to restore their homes, these artists were among the first to imagine the possibilities.

## Oakland Museum of Contemporary Art

On the corner of Lake Park Avenue and 41st Street, several abstract sculptures dressed in vibrant colors stand by a sign that reads Oakland Museum of Contemporary Art. Across the street lives the museum founder, Milton Mizenburg, a soft-spoken man with a fragile yet vivacious demeanor. When we first approached Milton, he was working in his garden and wearing a thin blue t-shirt and dark blue sweats. He invited us into his studio, a gallery of



photograph of Gustavo Rivera and Milton Mizenburg by Cara Spicer

finished and unfinished sculptures composed of materials ranging from oak to stone, some soaring as high as twelve feet. After high school, Milton worked for several years as a forklift driver in the U.S. Steel mill. Tired of the perfunctory duties and in search of an existence where he could express his creativity, Milton quit his job and undertook several odd jobs that enabled him to work with his hands, learning everything from plumbing to carpentry. In the evenings, Milton would return home and use his tools from work to experiment with sculpture.

After moving into the neighborhood in 1988, Milton noticed the daily build-up of trash and began to

sweep the surrounding sidewalks and streets. Despite the occasional “looks” from his neighbors, in particular the gang members who thought he was crazy, Milton made sweeping an everyday ritual. One day, Milton woke up to the dirtiest street he had ever seen: “I was in utter disbelief. The trash was everywhere!” He grabbed his broom and began sweeping. But Milton had had enough! He threw his broom down, looked up to the sky and cried, “God, I can’t do this anymore. It just ain’t right!” As he

began to head home, he noticed several of his neighbors out and about, sweeping the streets. Inspired by their actions, Milton decided to transform his community even more by building a museum for the neighborhood. With the approval of the newly elected alderman, he was able to obtain the tree trunks needed to begin his project. Soon, the entire community would pass by and congregate to see Milton cutting and sculpting the trunks into elaborate pieces. When the gang members asked him who these pieces belonged to, he responded, “It belongs to you, to the community, to those who lay their eyes on them.” Since the inception of the outdoor museum, Milton’s work has never been damaged, a sign of the utmost respect by everyone in the community.

Several years ago, Milton fell ill with blood and bone cancer, forcing him to take a long pause from his community activism. During this time, Milton’s family, neighbors and close friends gathered to maintain the museum. An ex-gang member installed poems by each of the sculptures and the area youth mowed the lawn. Even in his sickness, Milton was uniting the community.

Milton has made his museum a place that the people are proud of, make part of their daily walks and use as a gathering place. He was surprised to find that in a recent article in the *Chicago Tribune* on the revitalization of the South Side, people cited the museum as part of the reason they were looking forward to living in the Oakland community. He said, “Before, you never had people wanting to live close to Negroes. As soon as a Negro would move in, a flight would take place. But now, because I wanted to make my community beautiful, there are people, of all col-



ors and races that want to move down here to live close to me! That's change." Despite the setbacks Milton has had in the last several years, he continues to dream and work toward his goals. Milton's latest dream is to start the first American Museum of Contemporary Negro Art. Plans are underway.

### Little Black Pearl Workshop

A formally trained young artist entered the scene in 1994, and her success demonstrates the importance of involving the community in personal and professional endeavors. Monica Haslip was born and raised in Alabama and trained as an artist at the Alabama School of Fine Arts. She remembers it as a wonderful experience with peers from all over the United States. She noticed, however, that there were "not people like me" (African American) in art. Monica continued her training in Atlanta, where she once again noticed the dearth of "people like her." Discouraged, she went into marketing. Although she had no formal business training, she had the "natural gift of running my mouth" and ultimately found herself working as a senior marketing manager for Black Entertainment Television. She used her position to take artists into the schools and soon found that "we were still in the same place" (little exposure to the fine arts and African American artists).

Monica moved to Chicago in 1987, and soon decided she wanted to shine her artistic light in an African American neighborhood where she could make a direct impact on the level of exposure African American children have to the fine arts. She too stumbled on to NKO and, charmed by the historic architecture, began to drive around with the "Abandoned Properties" list. When the building she wanted finally went up for auction, she bid on it and acquired it "for a little bit of nothing."

The original name for her project was "Black Pearl Gallery," however, "After a while, we realized that didn't really describe what we were doing, we were really involved with the children and conducting classes so we became 'Little Black Pearl Workshop.'" Black pearls are something exquisite and rare. Monica recruited her first children from just north of her doorstep where "They were mostly busy catching snakes up by the train overpass." The kids were intrigued by what this young, beautiful black woman was offering and so the classes began.

The kids began to bring their friends and Little Black Pearl Workshop was in business.

Monica got to know her neighborhood from the "ground up." Monica believes her sincere interest in her immediate neighbors created a foundation of trust and support. Her building has never been vandalized or experienced theft. When she moved to Chicago, the Bishop from her church introduced her to people, but it was those whom she met on the street in the blocks around her home that were to become many of her first friends and allies. "There was not a lot going on back then and they took notice of my presence immediately. They were very protective." These included Bob, an alcoholic that she paid to live at her house during the initial phase of renovation. It was uninhabitable, so he set up house keeping on the front porch. This bizarre manifestation sparked plenty of comment on the block, further expediting Monica's rapid acquaintance with her new neighbors. Joe, another friend of Monica's, can be found on most days behind Little Black Pearl under the shade of two trees that he has named "Why and Why Not." Joe was born in 1934 in Rockhill, North Carolina. After growing up in Detroit and moving to Chicago after fighting in the Korean War, he worked as a bartender for thirty-eight years. Joe claims that Monica is his adopted daughter and Monica says that Joe is one of her most trusted advisors. Monica maintains that these early contacts and the way she reached out to the community were instrumental in the fulfillment of her dream to connect black children with the visual arts.

In 1994 she landed her first large grant, \$466,000 in Empowerment Zone money. With these funds she was able to "staff up" and buy equipment and materials. The grant also "enabled us to build other relationships within the philanthropic community." The first artist she hired was Gwendolyn Pruitt, a local artist who had come to her attention from one of her neighborhood friends. Gwendolyn has now been a staff member for eight years. By 1999 her building was stretched to capacity and she and her staff began looking around for a bigger space. She began to negotiate with the city for potential properties to be their new home. Monica stayed firm in her particular concept that combined art and entrepreneurship:

I am not from the world of not-for-profit.  
Every time I went in I would get told I had to

make a choice. You were supposed to be an arts education organization or be focused on community development. I felt we should have the opportunity to define who we were. Sometimes I got a little bit of a spanking for insisting we do both. We would be criticized for “watering down art.” Art for me as an African American woman has a duality. It has sustained me in an esthetic way and in a material way. There should be room for both.

It wasn’t long before the hubbub taking place down on Drexel Boulevard came to the attention of the alderman. Little Black Pearl’s grassroots support was bolstered by official recognition. In pursuing a larger space, Monica says she “learned the hard way. I was from Alabama! I didn’t understand the role politics plays in everything.” She also had “no earthly idea that a plan, a larger plan existed. I was operating on Monica’s plan and God’s plan. Then it was like, oh, wow, there’s something bigger going on here.” A quick study, Monica will oversee the Workshop’s tenth anniversary and debut of a 40,000 square foot facility in the fall of 2004. The program is expanding to include adults, technology training, gallery and studio space and workshops for other artists. A full roster of events and activities are scheduled to reach out to the adult artists that she had little opportunity to get to know while focused on her work with the children.

## Social “Climate”

One of the most striking assets in this community is the quality of social accessibility. We had visited a number of times when it began to dawn on us that we were routinely acknowledged in an open and hospitable way. This was true of total strangers on the street as well as those to whom we introduced ourselves when cultivating informants. We were left with the impression of an old-fashioned charm exuberantly reasserting itself in the wake of recent changes. The neighborhood expectation of “mingling” appeared to transcend racial or socioeconomic considerations, as illuminated in this conversation with Eldon, a hot dog cart vendor we met early in our research. In this excerpt, Eldon talks about an “exception that proves the rule,” a white couple that had moved in about a year prior and renovated a handsome two story wooden home:

You never see them in the neighborhood. They come out of the house to go to work. You might see them on the weekends for a few minutes when they go into the back yard. They stay out there for an hour or so, and then go back inside. There’s a white guy that lives down on Drexel [pointing north], he doesn’t have any trouble, he comes out, he knows everybody in the neighborhood. Those people are scared of the neighborhood.

Eldon thought this couple had bought their house to fix it up and “then get out of here with a profit.” We met the young couple at a later date and learned that they loved the home and were sorry to be leaving the neighborhood. A family illness required their move to Wisconsin. Perhaps, given more time, a little “mingling” would have cleared up this erroneous assumption.

The positive social climate is also seen in the following ethnographic example of Cara’s fieldwork in Hyacinth Park. On a sparkling summer day, Cara spent several hours in this green space on the corner of 44th Street and Greenwood Avenue. It has several sets of swings and a sandbox shaded by mature trees. A large grassy expanse invites game playing and a fountain continuously showers a circular area about fifteen feet in diameter. It was a cool and inviting place on a very warm day. Seated on a park bench adjacent to the fountain, Cara had several casual encounters that reinforced the sense of amiability that we have experienced in the neighborhood.

A young man pulled up on a bike and hopped off for a quick splash in the fountain. He agreed to talk with Cara for a few minutes. It turned out he lives with his mother and grandmother in a home they have owned for over forty years. When Cara asked what he liked about the neighborhood, he said, “I like that the kids can be out here without having to worry. Kids and the old people can walk around without being afraid. The police been doin’ they job. You *talk* too loud and they’ll be on you. I don’t know who calls them, but they do! Houses aren’t boarded up; it’s good kids don’t see that.” The natural courtesy and easy camaraderie that Cara observed and experienced throughout the afternoon typify the positive social climate we describe as a community asset.

## Communities Remembered

How do communities use history to create or recreate themselves? What groups will dictate the documentation of the community's history? In several of the community meetings we attended, we heard community members making reference to the mixed-income tradition of North Kenwood-Oakland. The mansions, condominiums and mid-rise apartment complexes that remain serve as reminders of the neighborhood's legacy of mixed-income housing. This history constructs local visions of the future and helps to create the strong attachment to place evident in many conversations we had with current and former neighborhood residents. People are constantly shifting through the archives of history, either oral or written, pulling out what they need for today. By resurrecting, negotiating, and manipulating the past, one can find a foundation for tomorrow.

When talking about their communities, residents in North Kenwood and Oakland frequently described the massive changes of the last several years. Public housing, especially the high-rise projects, constantly came up in conversations. When we asked Lance, a professor at the Center for Inner Cities Studies who has done research on street organizations about the changes that have occurred in the community, he said:

You mean communities. There were numerous communities that existed here before. Every high-rise building was a community in itself. Every project development was a community. It wasn't just Oakland or North Kenwood. Even now that the residents have been displaced, they continue calling their communities, neighborhoods, by the name of their buildings or complexes. They're from Newton, Wells or Lake Park. And they still see themselves as part of that community.

Patricia Matthis, a director of the Abraham Lincoln Centre, believes that "Building relationships on a personal level helps more than anything in the creation of community. Even when people leave their communities, they always hold on to those ties. The community doesn't end on a block. It follows you wherever you go. You take it

with you." Even though hundreds of public housing residents were scattered around the city, they still feel a strong connection to the area and maintain relationships with the friends and neighbors they left behind.

Tonya, a long-term resident of Oakland who had friends in the Lake Park Homes, believes that "when people are relocated, they are in the same situation but in different communities. A lot of times landlords do not accept



*photograph of Cara Spicer on Lake Park Avenue by Hannah Anderson*

Section 8 vouchers." Tonya suspects that public housing families now residing in the inner-city area of Chicago will be sent to the outskirts, where services, such as public transportation, are less reliable. "It wouldn't surprise me if they sent all these families to the suburbs and eventually cut services," she said. "They're doing it right now. They're closing several exits on the Dan Ryan." When we asked her why the high-rise projects failed, she replied, "What do you expect when you stack people on top of each other with the same problems?" She mentioned that Pershing to 53rd Street was loaded with housing projects and social issues:

If the men in a household were not working, they could not stay with their families. What do you think happened to the family structure? They absolutely destroyed it. Add on the introduction of drugs to the culture, with people wanting 'quick cash' over a steady job and mothers addicted to drugs and their children being raised by their grandmas, you do away with the family structure. Absolutely inhumane conditions.

Even residents who arrived after most of the high-rise projects had been emptied (they were only demolished in the late 1990s), express concern for the residents who used to live in these communities. Carisa moved into her Oakland gray stone in the late 1980s, when, according to her, gray stones used to range from \$3,000-10,000. "Now," she says, "They can run anywhere from \$300,000-400,000." Although she sees the community moving in the right direction, she feels concerned about her neighbors that are being priced out. Leroy, who moved to North Kenwood in the late 1980s and sets up a sno-cone stand during the summers, feels that "the 'progress' occurring here is only progress for those that have the means." Lake Park Crescent, located near the remaining high-rise towers, is being developed to include low-income, affordable and market rate residents. Though LPC hopes to include newer residents and people with strong attachments to the neighborhood who might otherwise be forced out due to economics, it remains to be seen how the twelve families in this new development (as of October 2004) will interact with each other and with the residents of the surrounding community.

### Living Histories

Nestled between the Metra tracks and the Lake Park Crescent development are the Lake Michigan Apartments, a fifteen-story CHA building, which houses 120 independent living elderly residents. We developed a rapport with many in the apartments including Steve, a 90 year-old man from Arkansas who was a pitcher for the Chicago Giants of the Negro Leagues during the 1930s and 1940s; Al, a guitarist who played many years with Muddy Waters; and Sydney, a heavily opinionated World War II veteran. Although residents of the Lake Michigan apartments are retired and often seen as a passive sector of the community, they carry with them knowledge and life experiences that contribute to the character and vitality of the community. They have experienced some of the most significant eras of American history, such as the Great Migration, the civil rights movement and World War II, and would make excellent guest speakers in community schools. Many expressed their interest in serving as tutors, such as coaches for little league baseball teams or guitar teachers.

## Recommendations

As applied anthropologists, a major component of our research was finding ways in which the community-at-large could benefit from our study. We believe that recent physical transformations and the integration of mixed-income housing complexes into the community provide for an excellent opportunity to create innovative cohesion-building programs. Below are several proposals which will hopefully improve the overall quality of life in the community and develop closer ties between community residents and institutions.

Even though the visual arts seem to be a notable forte of the community, we have observed a lack of other artistic outlets such as music and theatre. It seems as if most residents have little or no knowledge of the amphitheater located between Florence B. Price Elementary and Martin Luther King High schools. Apparently this facility is rarely used. A possible idea for its usage would be to perform a play on stage, possibly organized through a school or an organization such as Little Black Pearl. The University of Chicago could be asked to lend a big screen to transform the amphitheater into an open-air cinema during the summer months.

Another proposal, which might be easier once facilities become available at Lake Park Crescent, is the integration of the elderly independent living communities. Al, the guitarist in Muddy Water's band, could teach weekly classes while Steve could assist in little league coaching. Others could be guest speakers at a middle school or high school history class on WWII or the Great Migration. The Bronzeville area is often part of the African American history tourist circuit, and a tourist trolley through North Kenwood-Oakland would be informative if a local historian such as Mary Borderline or area youth were employed as guides. Walking tours by architecture connoisseurs such as Ruby would also be educational and beneficial to the community as a whole.

The recreational use of the Drexel Boulevard "Parkway" is a source of ambivalence for many residents and those engaged in the current planning process. One strategy might be to explore the return of Boulevard green spaces to the Park Department for management as a "passive" recreational space. This use was an original part of the Conservation Plan and one that might reconcile the

desire to retain the Parkway as a place to “meet and greet” while discouraging unlawful activities.

Finally, a comprehensive effort to clarify the different agencies involved in the current evolution of North Kenwood-Oakland could help residents understand the forces at work shaping their lives. Future efforts could incorporate graphic representation, story-telling and publications to “break it down” to a more digestible format. It was only toward the end of our research that we began to fully understand the ways in which the various governmental, institutional and private efforts are coming together in this transformation. A certain level of confusion is evident even in those who are engaged in the formal planning process. Understanding can only improve participation and inform the decisions that lie ahead.

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i The city of Chicago recognizes Kenwood and Oakland as separate neighborhoods. We studied the northern part of Kenwood and also studied Oakland. This area is commonly referred to as North Kenwood-Oakland.

ii Aldermanic Voting Records compiled by Dick Simpson, Ruben Feliciano, Rick Howard and Aaron Van Klyton of the Political Science Department at the University of Illinois at Chicago: <http://www.uic.edu/depts/pols/citycouncilvotes.html>.



# (Anthro)policy in Chicago Lawn: Answering the Call for Collective Community Experience

Ryan Hollon

**Ryan Hollon** graduated with honors from the University of Chicago, majoring in Anthropology. He currently organizes for community justice on Chicago's West Side.

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## Preliminary Note on the Character of Research

*"I have a problem with all this research. We know the answers to every problem. We cannot do our work with the community without knowing these things. It's just new to the academy. Until we change that – the way research dictates what needs to happen – we are going to be in the same cycle."*

—Community Organizer, SW Side Resident

The primary challenge in this project was entering a neighborhood for six weeks and capturing information relevant to an organization that has been working there for over a decade. As the above quote indicates, any dedicated social change agent in Chicago Lawn knows infinitely more about the area than a short-term ethnographer. The value of this type of research is that it provides a fresh perspective on an issue and region while retaining the views of those more intimately involved. This report does not attempt to add fundamentally new knowledge to those voices and energies that have brought consistent insights to their work in Chicago Lawn. Instead it attempts to archive and contextualize the views of residents and social change agents about local planning processes. This archive is most clearly represented in the longer sections of quotes found throughout the paper. The following pages should be understood as one summer's catalogue of insights that seem crucial to a neighborhood in the midst of dramatic shifts.

## Methods

This paper was written as part of the Urban Research and Curriculum Transformation Institute (URCTI) at the Center for Cultural Understanding and Change (CCUC) in The Field Museum.

The qualitative data archived here is intended to inform planning processes currently underway in Chicago Lawn. The hope is that anthropology's grasp of everyday life will help to account for those aspects of life consistently erased in the practices of community planning. For the purposes of this report, qualitative data has focused on organizational relationships, formal and informal service provision, resident activity patterns and neighborhood dynamics such as class and race tensions. Interviews drew from over fifty-five informants from across the spectrums of age, ethnicity, class and gender. The community narra-

*The value of this type of research is that it provides a fresh perspective on an issue and region while retaining the views of those more intimately involved.*

tives were gathered using ethnographic methods that interwove structured interviews, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. All narratives and realities presented from these interviews are partial truths at their best and potentially misguided at their worst. As one informant put it, "Imagine you come and ask me a question and I mumble out something that's unintelligible and you go off and interpret it however you want. I might have been given the wrong medication earlier that morning but you didn't want to push your role as a researcher and ask about that."

I have tried to do all I could throughout the interpretation process to complicate my role as a researcher in order to accurately interpret my informants. Nonetheless, because analysis is focused on themes of residential empowerment and community planning, it fails to account for numerous factors that would alter the

reported findings. Moreover, like many of the professional social service providers in the area, I do not live in Chicago Lawn. The majority of my research was conducted during daylight hours when most of the violence shaping the neighborhood does not occur.

## Southwest Youth Collaborative

*"Every other bouse is a 'for sale' sign, there is not a real sense of inclusiveness anywhere around here. The only one who creates inclusive space is the Southwest Youth Collaborative, they're very hands-on."*

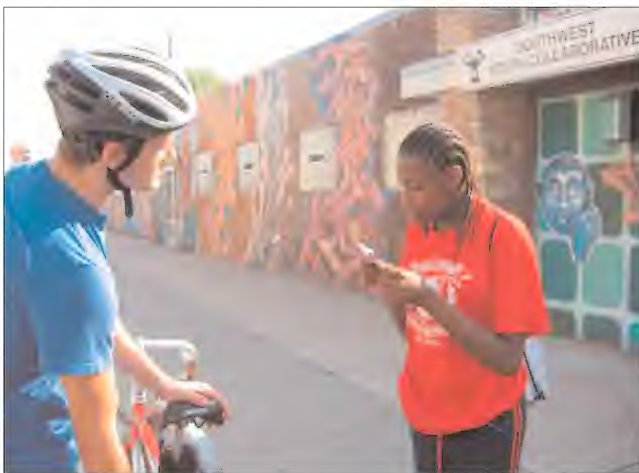
—Chicago Lawn Social Service Provider,  
SW Side Resident

Sixty-four hundred South Kedzie, the address of the Southwest Youth Collaborative (SWYC), is arguably the most diverse place on the Southwest Side. Located in Chicago Lawn, a neighborhood with a notorious history of violent racial tensions, the daily functions of the SWYC enable relationships that would not have been imaginable in the area just decades prior. As anyone who has been there will tell you, the SWYC is a busy place. It is busy providing a hub of intergenerational and multicultural activity. It is busy maintaining a youth-governed environment for teenagers that are alienated from many other aspects of their daily lives. And it is busy placing power in the hands of young people who have the energy, vision and capacity to create substantial social change before they even turn eighteen.

The building functions as a multi-organizational affiliate office for between four and five community organizations at a time. These organizations range from the Latino Organization of the Southwest to the 8th District Youth Net. The SWYC's own programs are primarily for Black, Latino and Arab youth from middle class and low-income backgrounds. Many of the youth that go to the Collaborative come from all across Chicago's neighborhoods, but those that frequent it most are from right in the area. According to some of the young people I spoke to there, those youth from across town come for specific political and cultural programming that is not provided in their own neighborhoods. Many of the

one hundred youth hired for the 2004 Summer Liberation Institute fit into this category. These teenagers work around issues ranging from the criminalization of youth of color to the zero-tolerance disciplinary policies that detrimentally affect their high schools. Those youth who come from Chicago Lawn generally live between the 63rd and 67th streets corridor. For these young people the Collaborative exists as both a place with dynamic activities and as an after school drop-in center. When I asked about those Chicago Lawn youth who live outside of this corridor and are not involved in the programming, one young man said "it too much to cross through to get here." This statement refers to the gang boundaries that divide the neighborhood. Each gang is outfitted with otherwise alienated youth and each has its own visions for the neighborhood's future.

The SWYC has been active for over a decade and its current budget is around one million dollars. In the



photograph of Ryan Hollon and young woman by Hannah Anderson

words of one of the Collaborative's directors, "Part of our role has been to help build other organizations and get them on their own two feet. We provide additional institutional resources in the neighborhood [because] we're just trying to find people who want to work and build partners." Most recently, the SWYC gave the Southwest Side CeaseFire Violence Prevention project its insurance policy so that they could obtain the necessary space to run a safe haven for gang-affiliated youth. Beyond helping to

build the capacity of affiliate organizations, the Collaborative sets a standard for reflective community practice among area agencies. As the executive director of one peer organization asserted, "For me what is exciting about the Collaborative is that there is a more comfortable space to feel okay radically challenging the framework in which we are constantly working. This becomes part of the social process of how we deal with each other... there is a challenge to be more perceptive." In a neighborhood where the organizational power of social change agencies determines much of the spectrum of political possibilities, this call to perceptiveness is crucial. As will be further elaborated, Chicago Lawn is currently at a moment in neighborhood history when the framework in which social change agencies are working is largely determining the plans and resources drafted for the coming years.

## Chicago Lawn

*"I live five blocks from where a Nazi flag used to hang on a daily basis. Now it's a center for the remembrance of Elijah Mohammed. I never thought I'd live in this area. I remember driving through here seeing little babies in diapers throwing rocks at the cars saying, 'Nig, Nig,' they couldn't even get out the whole word. Never thought I'd live in this neighborhood."*

—Terry, Chicago Lawn Resident

Chicago Lawn was once known for its white working-class families, Nazi flags and the stoning of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Despite a drastic shift in demographics, the current class and race tensions in Chicago Lawn are intricately tied to this history of socially constructed racism. While the large majority of those who once sympathized with Nazi flags in the area have either died or moved out, current neighborhood divisions are still premised by an inherited social space that is based on community isolation and exclusion. Chicago Lawn's physical infrastructure was largely determined at a time when the community sought to keep out non-whites. Today a neighborhood of extreme diversity is largely separated into ethnic enclaves. Very few have stopped to create the type of broad-based multicultural spaces that are necessary to challenge the obstacles posed by such a legacy of racism.

The clearest example of this is Marquette Park. An expansive neighborhood green space with a central field house, the park is the most physically open land in the

area. While people of color do not face the threats of violence they did for attempting to use the park years ago, Marquette Park still does not provide community-wide spaces that could challenge the remnants of that legacy. Residents assert that the park lacks sufficient programming, while social service providers attest that their attempts to run programs in the park are continually frustrated by its bureaucracy. Often times those programs that do exist are largely divided into ethnic enclaves: Arab American youth playing kickball, Caucasian youth playing golf, African American youth playing basketball.

The dearth of space for positive multicultural interaction means that the "Chicago Lawn community" lacks opportunities to facilitate neighborhood-wide political participation. One elderly African American resident whose neighbor's home was firebombed over thirty years ago says, "There are no clear boundaries anymore, now there are more Mexicans around and Palestinians." This comment is consistent with others that indicate awareness of diversity but a lack of access to it. While there has been talk of creating a commemorative statue of Martin Luther King's justice work in Chicago, the construction of places that can facilitate the coming together of diverse groups around common concerns is drastically underrepresented on neighborhood agendas. As the neighborhood increasingly becomes the home of a broad range of displaced individuals and groups seeking refuge on the Southwest Side, the need for such spaces could not be more pressing.

Transition in today's Chicago Lawn is less visible than the white flight that took place in the 1990s or the wide-scale displacement processes that are redefining other Chicago neighborhoods. Meanwhile, Chicago Lawn is increasingly understood as a point of re-entry for individuals leaving the prison system, and as a place of hope for those forced out of inner-city neighborhoods such as Pilsen and Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) dwellings. The neighborhood continues to be a primary point of entry for Mexican and Palestinian immigrants. More and more people are moving to Chicago Lawn, making clear its status as one of a shrinking number of areas available for low-income Chicagoans of color. While these newer trends are currently changing class patterns in the area, the area's ethnic diversity was initially composed of those residents of color who could afford to move into what was then a middle class neighborhood.

The short history of neighborhood diversity is thereby compounded with today's changing income patterns. This creates a complex mixture of class and race

narratives that indicate feelings of and calls to exclusion. Consider the following resident perspectives:

*"Relations aren't good between African Americans and Latinos. We relate them with drugs. And I never get the chance to talk to someone to see what they think about us."*

**—Eve, Immigrant from Mexico**

*"White and older Latino families see blocks going down, there is somebody out here saying 'the people from the projects, the city is giving them houses,' I ask who is saying that and they say 'somebody'."*

**—Gertrude, White**

*"I just don't want the neighborhood to get dumped on... Nobody wants Section 8 and the problems that come with them."*

**—Terry, African American**

*"They talk about Mexicans like they're gonna take over. I'm like—did you forget how you grew up? Things go in cycles. That's what happened to black folks in the 60's. Each community that we've had has been a leftover."*

**—Paula, African American**

*"The people speaking Hispanic that were here first, they are moving out because they say they don't like the Hispanics that are moving in—because they say they're Mexican hillbillies."*

**—Judith, White**

*"No other neighborhood on the South Side is this diverse. None of the other diverse neighborhoods in Chicago—even Roger's Park—has the historic presence of the African American community in its midst. In dealing with its borders there are some very clear relationships in the discussion between safety, violence, and race. The drive to maintain an ethnic identity has been part of the community narrative."*

**—Rasha, Palestinian**

The perceived conflicts captured in these statements conflate identity with race, class, language and/or background. In many cases, residents' everyday understandings of these factors contribute to the preservation of segregated social interactions. This segregation, in turn, can contribute to acts of violence like hate crimes and gang shootings. Yet while the above quotes display a spectrum of community tensions, they also indicate an array of community consciousnesses. These varying levels of awareness often determine the types of social interplays that people try to create for themselves and for others. While everyone in the neighborhood is aware of the demographic shifts at some level, some people are also trying to overcome stereotypes and raise awareness with the hope of engaging diverse residents.

## The Challenge of Planning Political Will

*"That's all just background. When we looked at this community we knew there are a lot of folks that are new who don't know what this community is, and there a lot of folks who have been here who don't know what this community is now but know what it used to be."*

—John, an organizer in the NCP process

Though Chicago Lawn is many different things to many different people, the above quote implies that there is presently nobody in the neighborhood who knows what Chicago Lawn is today. The quote came from a sector of the neighborhood that is trying to outline a comprehensive plan for what Chicago Lawn will be like in the future. At a time when state budget cuts have prompted Illinois social change agents to think about ways to reduce their dependence on government funds, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) has catalyzed a major non-governmental planning process in Chicago Lawn. One of the sixteen designated New Communities Programs (NCP) in Chicago, the Chicago Lawn NCP is attempting to plan the neighborhood's future while drawing from a pre-existing network of area institutions (e.g. church parishes, established social service providers and the like). Across Chicago, the NCP community development strategies aim to work collaboratively and non-confrontationally to draw up five-year Quality of Life plans for the given community areas. For those organizing the process in Chicago Lawn, their institutionally-oriented approach

is possible because the area has, according to one coalition member, "done a very, very good job at networking at the executive level." This is further evidenced by the representation of social service executives on the NCP task force.

Amidst this executive-driven planning process there is a pressing need to advance a discussion that began at the Southwest Community Task Force (a task force which developed in response to a series of youth shootings in the area). This discussion centers on including a wider variety of grassroots agencies and community residents in the NCP. It is necessary for future planning energies to complement their executive focus with a simultaneous emphasis on youth empowerment at decision-making tables. Despite the dramatic growth of the youth population in the area, only one of thirty-five individuals on the NCP task force is under eighteen. At a time when organizations like SWYC are building the political capacity of youth, it is entirely possible to more actively promote the reinvestment of mainstream political power in youth. SWYC programs like the Summer Liberation Institute (mentioned earlier) and Generation Y, in which youth follow a democratic process in designing their own rules and disciplinary measures, show very clearly that young people in the community are prepared for civic engagement. Any well-planned efforts towards sharing the area's political power with youth would have significant multiplier effects. Such efforts would provide fundamental contributions towards the goal of building neighborhood capacity and diversifying connections to resources coming from outside the neighborhood (community strengths are treated in more detail in the "Current Efforts for Change" section below). Additionally, increased work on residential empowerment would more fairly distribute resources in a neighborhood whose social service providers are almost exclusively located along the 63rd Street commercial corridor. Currently the seventy-two program goals designed by the NCP process are set to be distributed to the two primary 501c3 clusters in the area (mainstream and grassroots) that are divided into three geographical camps along the 63rd Street corridor. Wherever possible, this distribution should be addressed in a way that does not continue to subdivide and subcontract out the social service labor of the area, but instead creates opportunities for residents to take more active roles in their own futures.



Furthermore, neighborhood-based policy interventions like the Chicago Lawn NCP are complicated by the lack of a Chicago Lawn community per se. Given the myriad of tensions that exist in the area, it is no secret that residents living between 59th Street on the north, 75th Street on the south, Central Avenue on the west, and Bell Street on the east do not universally consider themselves members of the Chicago Lawn community area. Some identify more with West Englewood, some with West Lawn, and some with Marquette Park. Even among those who under-

stand themselves to be living in the geographic region known as Chicago Lawn, no resident interviewed for this project links this understanding to a comprehensive “sense of community.” Meanwhile, the Chicago Lawn NCP is targeted within specific geographic boundaries. The challenge becomes creating an inclusive sense of community within these boundaries that then enables broad-based political participation. To get a sense for these challenges, look at some of the community perspectives on the NCP process included below and on the facing page.

*“It’s a controlled democracy.”*

**–May, resident not involved in the task force, at a NCP community forum**

*“The NCP is people in high classes, able to do something in the neighborhood. Sometimes they have too many priorities, it can be overwhelming.”*

**–Lithuanian Immigrant attending NCP forum**

*“The notion that it’s a controlled democracy is good but it’s easy to say. The question is what is the alternative. There are old players around that have really stuck around. There are still people here who fought the Nazis. You have a young population entering the community. For that reason it’s beneficial to bring all these groups together.”*

**–Community Organizer on the task force**

*“I didn’t like the idea that people from outside our community who maybe have organizations here are making decisions for our community. I think residents should be more involved.”*

**–Judith, lifelong Chicago Lawn resident**

*“A lot of times we’ve been utilized as that non-conventional symbol in the NCP process... As Muslims in a highly contested atmosphere we have to be selective about who we build our relationships with, but we don’t have the luxury of being that selective. If there is a space to raise contestations within an environment then I am comfortable working in that environment.”*

**–Rasha, Palestinian organizer**

*"We don't want to be stuck with a plan that nobody is committed to doing. It's about capacity, it's always about capacity... We're only gonna talk to people who know how to talk to other people. We set the process up to build relationships. If we wanted them on the task force but they don't do the one-on-ones, we took them off the list. If they're too busy to meet, they're too busy to be on the task force. We had a Catholic Priest, a Lutheran Pastor, and a Muslim Imam basically to bless the task force members. Then they knew it's an obligation that extends beyond normal meetings. It's all about relationships. It's all about commitment."*

**–An NCP Organizer**

*"How does Joe Smo who lives on 63rd and Washtenaw know about it? They're not inclusive, they commissioned these forty-five members with priests and Imam, maybe a rabbi. And they told these people to go out and develop an agenda. It's these people sitting around saying what we need...we need a statue...we need a... Every person on that task force has an interest. I look at it often like what are we doing."*

**–Amelia, social service provider in Chicago Lawn**

*"The area we met in the other night is very different than where I live. What exactly are the goals for each community? I don't know how this works, nobody has ever said what are the goals of this meeting. I don't know anything about SWOP [Southwest Organizing Project], someone told me they were active in the early seventies... Are we all trying to do the same thing, what is that same thing. It's only so long that people can keep up the feel-good momentum... will they eventually help us get those things? If there is money to be distributed, how is it going to be distributed? I've seen it before. People hold hands much better when they feel like they are getting what they deserve."*

**–Terry, resident not involved in the task force, at a NCP community forum**

The challenge for creating inclusiveness involves negotiating tensions between newcomers and current stakeholders, as well as middle- and low-income agendas. The opening line of the vision statement for Chicago Lawn's Quality of Life plan reads, "Because we love Chicago Lawn and want to stay here, we envision a community that in five years would be voted one of the top ten most desirable neighborhoods in the county." The line suggests that those involved in the planning are people who have been in the neighborhood for years and feel their place in the neighborhood is threatened. The goal of making it a "desirable neighborhood" implies a will to attract people who would move there by choice as opposed to the people who are moving there due to processes of socioeconomic disenfranchisement. However, as one observer of the Chicago Lawn NCP process advanced, "communities come together to keep others out."

One level of community division marked by the NCP process is between existing stakeholders and already marginalized newcomers. Referring to the class composition of these two groups in the NCP process, Amanda from SWYC asserts:

When you look at these two levels, look at who they are composed of and who they represent, they are creating their own smaller network in order to survive. Can the new communities that have also developed get a share of the resources? If you're not thinking about the low-income constituency, then they are not in your plan. Our work is about creating political will. The issue for us is creating the discourse and political will to bring the low-income agenda to the table. When you work with the sector of kids we work with their agenda is just to survive. They're talking about the parks, hospitals, flowers. When we sit at this table we're concerned with the low-income group.

For Amanda, the NCP process is comprised of agencies (many of whom are social service providers) that focus on middle-income agenda items due to fear that the current influx of low-income residents will compromise the pool of those middle-income individuals barely hanging onto their class position. As she notes, this is occurring at a time in American history when increased economic stratification is leading to the disappearance of the middle class.

There are, of course, low-income residents at some levels of the NCP process. The division between the spectrums of agendas coming to NCP meetings is illustrated when you look at the way the call for a five-year plan breaks down at the individual level. Ray, a middle-aged African American male who has not been a part of any of the task force planning meetings says, "I am a convicted felon. I do security at church. This felony thing is something that happened when I was younger. I know friends that sell drugs, I was guilty by association. When I see somebody now I ask them, 'Where you think you're gonna be at in the next five years.'" Whereas Ray describes a sector of the neighborhood seemingly without control of their own horizon, Terry points to both a different sense of time and a different vision for the future. Her broader scope of concern articulates her desire to stay in the neighborhood and is partially determined by her class position. A middle-aged African American female who also has not been a part of the planning task force but has attended more NCP community meetings than Ray, she explains:

My sense is that in five years, this will be the new Englewood or Bronzeville [referring to the changes in investment patterns she sees in these communities]. There are some very nice small homes in this community. If we don't get dumped on within the next five years this community will be recognized as attractive... in that time I don't know what will happen.

Read together, Ray and Terry's comments reveal how the conditions of possibility for planning are largely determined by the conditions of possibility within any given individual's life. One's ability to maintain can thereby empower one's ability to make change.

Amanda from SWYC emphasizes the need to understand how the middle- and low-income levels are represented in the social service provision world. She says the middle class is worried about becoming the lower class, while many social service providers still target the middle class. Thus there is a lack of representation of low-income needs on neighborhood agendas as many social service providers still try to create a neighborhood for those they identify as their primary constituency.

While the planning process attempts to create links between diverse groups and gather community

input, due to the emphasis on institutional organizing, the process does not include the broader base of community stakeholders in the actual planning. It is this base of low-income voices that many of the grassroots agencies would like to see better represented during implementation phases, and at some level it is this base that grassroots agencies are charged with representing. As a whole the NCP undoubtedly provides a unique opportunity that could ultimately contribute greatly to multicultural neighborhood cooperation. Nonetheless, the five-year plan runs the risk of homogenizing institutional agendas while further dividing social service labor in the area. In order for the implementation of the NCP plan to intervene in a way that creates sustainable success, it is necessary for the available resources to be invested in new stakeholders.

As parts of the neighborhood have organized to take control of the community's future, there is a clear need to cultivate new leaders and redistribute power among a broader base of residents in order to make any attempts at democratic community change viable. There are numerous actors within the process that are willing to work towards this goal. Yet while the NCP's primary organizers are sincerely trying to build a sense of community at every step of the process, for many their approach is not effectively building inclusive paths for political participation. Due to under-addressed neighborhood dynamics, there is a potential gap between the organizers' intentions and the outcomes of their energies. Efforts towards building political participation are severely restrained by the limited "sense of community" that would otherwise motivate broad-based involvement. As has been illustrated, Chicago Lawn has insufficient dynamic multicultural spaces. This is compounded with class differentials that demand more productive attention on neighborhood agendas. In sum, this means an agenda needs to be developed that invests more resources in permanent spaces capable of catalyzing dynamic community participation for those residents who continue to be marginalized. In order for grassroots participation to be cultivated amidst determinations of the community's future, it is necessary for grassroots agencies to help lead these changes at the neighborhood level. As described below, many are already doing their part.

## Current Efforts for Change

Some of the residents that understand the relationship between awareness and action are actively working to create multicultural learning environments around these issues. One of these, a Latina social change agent in the neighborhood, is trying to organize youth forums on race. She explains, "There needs to be content. Kids are getting shot over this. The Arab American Action Network got burned down over this. SANAD [another Arab American and Arab immigrant agency] got a brick through their window over this." Still others try to create diverse spaces on the basketball court or in their church choirs. Any effort to unite diverse groups across differences will result in 'cohesion' much different than that previously experienced by longtime Chicago Lawn white residents who have stayed in the area.

Places where people regularly come together are post-shooting vigils, worship services, CAPS and Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) meetings, and the occasional community forum<sup>1</sup>. The challenge in today's Chicago Lawn is to stimulate cooperative efforts that allow for cultural differences in the absence of a single ethnic or class identity. Any shared social space developed today must explicitly depart from the legacy of violent social exclusion. As Rasha asserts, "For some what might have been a fond memory, was a nightmare for a large segment of the population." Diversity is presently something that is valued in official neighborhood discourses and begrudged during informal conversations. While an official premium should be placed on diversity, the reasons for this must be clear and there must indeed be content. An emphasis might be placed not only on cultural and intellectual growth, but also on the type of political growth that is made possible through cross-cultural coalitions built on the daily reinforcement of trust and common understanding. There are other existing efforts to create "spaces," both metaphorical and physical, that bring people together in a way that allows for cultural differences. These ongoing efforts, which include contributions by block clubs, cultural literacy programs, informal child care networks and organizations like Sisters Organized for United Leadership, are discussed in the concluding sections of this paper.

## Grassroots Agencies

Several organizations currently operating in Chicago Lawn are tremendous assets to the community, and regardless of their size (emerging, developing or mature), with additional support they each could have a greater impact<sup>ii</sup>. Both SWYC and the Inner City Muslim Action Network (IMAN) run regular programs that empower youth and their families through collective community experiences. Metropolitan Family Services, whose Southwest headquarters are actually in West Lawn, is a professional social service provider that does specialized counseling. Southwest Women Working Together enables women and their families to lead empowered and violence-free lives. Greater Lawn Community Youth Network, while working primarily with youth under twelve, provides an array of educational, cultural and recreational services. The Arab American Action Network, while already a mature grassroots agency, is now beginning to emphasize and develop their youth programming. Their focus is on Arab immigrants and Arab American youth.

The CeaseFire Safe Haven at St. Rita's church, with the support of SWYC and SWOP, will be developed as a model drop-in center for gang affiliated youth. It will provide activities for the most violence-prone youth during the most violence-prone hours of the day. This brief list of organizational assets in the Chicago Lawn area demonstrates local efforts to be more inclusive of the diversity, as represented particularly by youth, and suggests pathways for building future efforts toward positive social change.

## Building on Existing Assets to Create Sustainable and Inclusive Solutions

The need to invest neighborhood power in the residents is clear. And, according to many residents in Chicago Lawn, so is the need to constructively deploy underutilized buildings and foreclosed homes. Several examples of community activities and organizations already at work in Chicago Lawn have been given, and more are described below. These forces should serve as a foundation for future efforts and planning in the community. Specific recommendations include:

- Team up with capable mainstream organizations to secure spaces that can foster grassroots political participation; provide mainstream organizations

a way to contribute to an inclusive community mission (e.g. attaining space, deploying NCP resources); create spaces that build multicultural and intergenerational interaction with leadership that represents Chicago Lawn's diverse composition.

- Work with other grassroots agencies to develop a plan for "Homebase Community, Family and Youth Organizing Centers" modeled after the previously existing West Englewood Youth and Family Center run by SWYC.
- Model the proposal to provide holistic community programming that will counter the division of social service labor in the area. Consider designing the attainment of these spaces as a system to reward blocks that get organized.
- Work with pre-existing resident organizations (e.g. block clubs) wherever possible around the government of these spaces. Help develop a block-based network to work with the already growing youth empowerment movement in the area.
  - Create intergenerational organizing strategies that allow these groups to work collaboratively, while maintaining spaces for both adult and youth ownership.
- Create spaces allowing for integrated and cross-organizational programming.
  - Work with blocks near Homebase Centers to create awareness that, as one Neighborhood Housing Services employee says, "there aren't problems with Section 8 renters, the problems are with absentee management."
  - Continue pattern of collaboration between fellow grassroots organizations and youth-led groups.
    - Co-develop community organizing curricula with area organizers interested in creating resident power bases (e.g. how to organize for changes in schools).
    - Address the rise in teen dating violence and create dialogue among parents/adults and youth through a regular workshop designed by Sisters Organized for United Leadership and Southwest Women Working Together.



- Work with CeaseFire to create more spaces for programs like “In These Shoes” that catalyze intergenerational dialogues and the pressures of gangs.
- Target existing cultural literacy programs to deal specifically with changing community patterns.
  - Facilitate multicultural potlucks for “new neighbors.”
  - Develop workshops that address where people are moving from (e.g. West Bank, Mexico, a downstate prison, a demolished high-rise).
- Lend space/program resources to pre-existing informal child care networks wherever possible. Investigate programs to help informal day care networks establish formal homecare programs.
  - A resource library for homecare providers.
  - Create a system where homecare providers can cover for each other when emergencies arise.
- Provide grant-writing trainings for residents and other initiatives that will enable Chicago Lawn community members to compete for social change positions in the neighborhood.
- Where possible, develop those few vacant lots that do exist with intergenerational urban agriculture programs.

## Bibliography

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|-------------------------|---|
| New Communities Project |   |
| N/D                     | Quality of Life Plan: Chicago Lawn.<br>Handout at Southwest Organizing Project meeting, summer 2004. Chicago: SWOP. |

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i While school and to some extent the workplace also provide cross-cultural interactions, these institutions are often largely shaped by both the extra-school community dynamics and persistent institutional racisms.

ii The wording and content of this section is tied directly to the geography of Chicago Lawn on a land use map. Find this map at [www.fieldmuseum.org/urbanresearch/](http://www.fieldmuseum.org/urbanresearch/)

# Urban Research and Curriculum Transformation Institute: Internship Project and Partner List

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## Summer 2003

### **Intern**

Nishaant Choksi, University of Chicago

### **Partnering Community-Based Organization**

Bethel New Life, Inc.

### **Project**

An Austin "Snapshot": A Nine-Week Asset-Based  
Ethnography of a Far West Side Community

### **Interns**

Brady Gordon, Stanford University; Kimberly Schultz,  
Northwestern University

### **Partnering Community-Based Organization**

Imagine Englewood...if!

### **Project**

Collaborate, Communicate, and Connect:  
A Vision for Getting the Word Out in Englewood

### **Interns**

Ericka Menchen, University of Illinois at Chicago;  
Andrea Rincon, University of Illinois at Chicago

### **Partnering Community-Based Organization**

*Centro Comunitario Juan Diego*

### **Project**

Choosing Healthcare in South Chicago:  
Information Strategies and Provider Choices

### **Intern**

Kristen Florence Pappas, Illinois Wesleyan University

### **Partnering Community-Based Organization**

Southwest Youth Collaborative

### **Project**

Visual Transparency: An Exploration into the  
Visual Representation of Space at the Southwest  
Youth Collaborative

### **Intern**

Deirdre Pfeiffer, Northwestern University

### **Partnering Organization**

North Town Village

### **Project**

Before the Barbeque: Community Building and  
the Arts in a Mixed-Income Chicago Neighborhood

## Summer 2004

### **Intern**

Maria Teresa Campos, University of Chicago

### **Partnering Community-Based Organization**

Centro Comunitario Juan Diego

### **Project**

Creating Realities in South Chicago with an  
Asset-Based Approach

### **Interns**

Yariella Coello, Northwestern University; Kelly Thomas,  
DePaul University

### **Partnering Community-Based Organization**

Imagine Englewood...if!

### **Project**

From the Ground Up: Vacant Lots and  
Community Involvement in Englewood

**Intern**

Ryan Hollon, University of Chicago

**Partnering Community-Based Organization**

Southwest Youth Collaborative

**Project**

(Anthro)policy in Chicago Lawn: Answering the Call for Collective Community Experience

**Intern**

Mario McHarris, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

**Partnering Community-Based Organization**

Bethel New Life, Inc.

**Project**

West Garfield Park: A Nine-Week Ethnography on Chicago's West Side

**Interns**

Gustavo Rivera, University of Chicago; Cara Spicer, University of Indiana Northwest

**Partnering Organization**

Lake Park Crescent

**Project**

Building on the Past: A New Foundation for Community in North Kenwood-Oakland

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